

BRIGADE ADVISING AGAINST DAESH

CPT GERARD T. SPINNEY

The purpose of this article is to inform and discuss theater-specific variations for brigade advise and assist (A&A) missions throughout the Operation Inherent Resolve (OIR) theater. By sharing the successes and failures of our team over the past six months in Iraq, future A&A teams can better prepare for a challenging (and sometimes frustrating) mission set.

Team members' ability to communicate effectively in order to influence their counterparts to a desired outcome is the foundation for success for an A&A team. Our engagement experience can be broken down into three major phases: building the team, building initial rapport, and advising and assisting during combat operations.

Building the Team

The base of our five-man A&A team consisted of the troop commander, fire support officer (FSO), and company intelligence support team (CoIST) officer — representing three major warfighting functions: mission command, fires, and intelligence. Choosing the remaining two members presented multiple options for the team. We had two Soldiers who recently graduated from two months of Arabic culture and language class at Fort Campbell, KY, and we thought they could be force multipliers. Having a troop commander, FSO, and intelligence officer organized with two language and culture-trained Soldiers worked well for our mission.

Our unique five-man team presented challenges in regards to day-to-day administrative and support activities. We attacked this problem set by assigning each member of the team with specific focus areas. Both the FSO and CoIST officer were dual-hatted with focus areas. The FSO shared the focus of movement and maneuver with the commander, sharing the tactical planning and battle tracking responsibilities of the Iraqi Army (IA) brigade we were assigned. The CoIST officer, in addition to his intelligence responsibilities, focused on our communications with the IA and our higher headquarters. Our two Soldiers were responsible for the sustainment and protection of the team. A five-man team requires extra effort from all team members to be successful, but our distribution of the duties and responsibilities helped us concentrate on the mission at hand.



The author, CPT Gerard Spinney, speaks with his Iraqi Army counterpart from the Ninawa Operations Command prior to a security meeting at Camp Swift, Iraq, on 6 September 2016.

(Photo by 1LT Daniel Johnson)

Building Initial Rapport

In the current theater, building initial rapport begins either at the IA unit's training center rotation (referred to as "building partner capacity" [BPC] sites) or during operations. We were fortunate to meet our IA brigade during BPC where they were training for their next operation.

The initial meeting with the IA brigade commander took place at the training center. We introduced ourselves and explained that we were there as enablers for him and his brigade. The commander had previously served with coalition force advisors and he was excited for the opportunity to work with us. Starting with the initial meeting, we began to observe him and his subordinate commanders, establishing our initial assessment of his brigade's capabilities.

After introductions and small talk about our backgrounds, we eventually started identifying how our partnership was going to work. We explained what we wanted out of the relationship and discussed the specific training and knowledge that our team collectively brought to the partnership. While we were versed in light infantry doctrine and training, he was a tank commander. We explained to him that based on his past mechanized experience, we would look to him, at times, as a mentor since he would be able to bring insightful perspectives to discussions. The brigade commander appeared surprised by our comments but seemed to take the comment to heart. Later in our partnership, he responded to our initial conversation by explaining many of his decisions. Although my counterpart frequently lectured us on his methods and decision-making processes, this allowed us to understand his thought processes, which later facilitated us in predicting how he would act/react while facing different problem sets during mission execution.

As we continued our assessment, we began to discuss our counterpart brigade's strengths and weaknesses. We were deliberate and meticulous during these conversations, ensuring we did not disrespect the commander. One way we would obtain specific information from him without making him feel like he was being interrogated was to specifically shape the questions. We would lead him to bringing up a certain topic of discussion. At times, this would take some dialogue before we would get to the topic we wanted to address. We had to be patient though. For example, one of our goals was to collect information on his maintenance company and maintenance plan for the upcoming operation. Instead of jumping directly to the question, we started by asking him about his battalion command time and his biggest challenges, assuming that maintenance would eventually come up. He immediately responded, "Maintenance of my tanks." He opened up the topic of maintenance and so we capitalized on his answer. As long he brought up the topic, the conversation could become more direct without it coming across as a specific interrogation about his maintenance program. My counterpart felt like he was developing us as military leaders while we were getting him to explain exactly what our higher headquarters expected from us.

Another advising practice we used early on in our partnership was the precise timing of questions. At this time during OIR, the Iraqi movements and operations were at a very consistent pace. This allowed for extra attention to be paid to the units that were at the training center (especially from our higher headquarters). Whether the requests for information (RFIs) were from squadron, brigade, or division, they were endless. As the brigade advisors who had to interact with our counterparts on a daily basis — never mind being capable of maintaining strong communication and trust with them during an upcoming operation — we had to pick and choose the RFIs to bring up with our counterpart. We would queue the RFIs based on our higher headquarters' priorities.

During one meeting, our counterpart briefed his role in the upcoming operation on a terrain model. This helped us comprehend his concept of the operation and his understanding of his brigade's task and purpose. His plan and what the coalition forces were tracking as the plan usually differed. Without telling our counterpart we had issues with his plan, we found creative ways to play devil's advocate. We would inquire about actions if there was resistance from this town. If ordered to go further south, how would he accomplish that? By doing this we were able to influence the commander to a more tactically sound course of action. Of note, the terrain model (built by the Iraqis and done quite well) was a valuable advising medium.

Logistical planning and preparation is significant in a mechanized infantry brigade. Our higher headquarters paid special attention to this aspect of our mission. The IA had a relaxed approach to logistical planning. We carefully shaped our discussions to meet our specific information requirements. We approached IA leaders about logistics carefully. We did not want to come across as criticizing the lack of planning or put them in an uncomfortable position.

Leading up to the operation, fuel and maintenance became a topic of conversation every time we met. There were some questions we never got answered, and we had to just accept that. If pushed harder, our trust and strong partnership could have been in jeopardy. By the end, our counterpart knew logistics was a significant concern of ours.

As noted earlier, effective communication with our Iraqi counterparts is critical. The biggest facilitator for clear and effective communication was a linguist. Ensuring that the linguist knew the intent of the discussion prior to the engagement was essential. Before each engagement with our counterpart, we would take the linguist aside and go over the talking points for the discussion. We would explain the task and purpose of the conversation and any necessary background information that needed. Rehearsing worked great for getting the most out of our conversations; however, we would caution others using this method. Do not let the linguist take the rehearsal and conduct the entire conversation himself. This happened on multiple occasions during phone conversations. The linguist would take the task and purpose given to him and execute the entire conversation with our counterpart and then hang up. This was incredibly frustrating because the linguist wouldn't translate any of the responses until after the conversation. He recorded only the first answer our counterpart would give him without asking any additional follow-up questions. There was no dialogue. This method would get AN answer but never THE answer we needed. These conversations usually left us with more unanswered questions than before we started. Rehearse with the linguist but ensure you control the conversation.

Advising During Operations

While we were at the BPC site, our A&A team was co-located with the division A&A team. The division A&A team advised our IA brigade's higher headquarters. Being co-located with the division advisors allowed us to get to know the key leaders in our brigade's higher headquarters. This interaction assisted our own efforts in helping the brigade leadership meet their commander's intent. We found the more we listened to my counterpart's commander (division commander) discuss the upcoming operation the more we understood what was expected from our counterpart, which assisted us in our efforts. Spending time with the division commander was not only a valuable experience for us, but we obtained significant credibility with our counterpart who had witnessed our daily interactions with the division commander.

Once our IA brigade began combat operations, they were no longer task organized under their division headquarters. The new command relationship between our counterpart and his higher headquarters was more complex than the previous relationship. Our IA brigade was now attached to an operational command. This relationship separated us by two command levels within the advisor structure. Our counterpart's new commander was advised by our brigade commander, and our squadron commander was aligned to the division commander. The new dynamic command relationship, which had the operational commander playing the major role in planning, did not allow for the same direct access to our counterpart we had grown accustomed to. Additionally, our counterpart operated away from the coalition base during operations as he staged forward with his troops. The combination of lack of access while being geographically separated limited our communication.

When geographically separated, we advised and assisted over the phone. When our counterpart would return to the operations center to meet with his commander, we would meet with him to discuss operations. These chance encounters were sporadic but ranged from two to four visits a week. Besides sitting down face-to-face with our counterparts during these visits, all additional advising was conducted over the phone. With poor cell phone service in the area of operations and limited communication at the operations center, communication with our counterpart was significantly degraded.

Recommendations

As a brigade-level A&A team, you must have patience and a solid understanding of the Arab culture. These two attributes will help you advise and assist your counterparts. The challenge of a captain advising a colonel, or general, is ever present for obvious reasons but is not as significant as one would think; be comfortable with this relationship because of the level of education and preparation you have done. Between your training and knowledge, there are significant opportunities where you can advise and assist your counterpart. Collectively, you and your counterpart must identify and agree on how you can best assist him. Once you and your counterpart have identified the assist and enabling capabilities, the advising capabilities will present themselves. In our case, intelligence, fire support, and logistics were the three areas where we could advise and assist resourcefully.

If given the opportunity to build the rapport during BPC, move to the training areas every day and see the subordinate units in your brigade. Engage with the junior leaders of the battalions and you will learn about the brigade. In order to get a complete understanding of the brigade's capabilities, do not rely solely on the senior leader's point of view. In addition to getting out and speaking with the junior leaders, ensure that all of the equipment that you distribute to the brigade has been trained on. If they are not familiar with the equipment, they will not use it. We learned this the hard way when we issued satellite phones.

While planning for operations, get your counterpart to a terrain model and discuss the plan. Ensure that the plan he is receiving is similar to the plan that his commander is briefing to the coalition leaders. Use this time to build rapport. Ask leading questions to broaden the scope of your discussion. The more you get into the tactical mindset of your counterpart, the easier it will be to predict his movements during execution. We used the mentor/mentee approach on multiple occasions, and it helped us understand our counterpart's way of thinking, both tactically and strategically.

During operations, you must understand how to best integrate into the planning process. This is something we recommend you discuss with your higher headquarters prior to beginning the advising mission. Lastly, maintain daily communication with your counterpart, if only to ask how he is doing and what you can do for him. Most nights we met with him he clearly showed signs of a long day of operations, so we simply asked him how he was doing. Show genuine care and concern for him and his soldiers; he will reciprocate when you desperately need some information from him. If in-person contact with your counterpart is degraded, ensure you develop a strong communication plan and ensure that the cell phone on the PACE (primary, alternate, contingency, emergency) plan has the correct provider for the area you will be operating in. Our communication plan failed due to two reasons. First, there was limited cell service where our IA brigade was operating, and second, the lack of confidence and training with the satellite radios.

My last comment on advising during operations is that advising an IA unit currently in the fight is difficult with limited contact. If the brigade A&A teams are able to advise, assist, and accompany, it would significantly increase their capabilities. The IA units would benefit the most from allowing advisors to move forward to advise the IA brigade leadership from the brigade headquarters. The presence of advisors would build an increased sense of confidence in the units on the ground and their production would prove it.

Our IA brigade has been conducting offensive operations for five months. Our observations and recommendations are a result of six months of our brigade A&A mission. We spent one month building rapport and five months with our brigade conducting offensive operations. The purpose of this article is to inform and discuss theater-specific variations for brigade A&A missions throughout the OIR theater. Additionally, this article helped my team identify that some of our own advising methods and techniques needed revising and readjusting.

CPT Gerard Spinney is currently assigned to 1st Security Force Assistance Brigade, Fort Benning, GA. His prior assignments include serving as a troop commander in 1st Squadron, 75th Cavalry Regiment, 2nd Brigade Combat Team (BCT), 101st Airborne Division (Air Assault) at Fort Campbell, KY; company commander for 1st Battalion, 26th Infantry Regiment, 2nd BCT, 101st Airborne Division (Air Assault); and as a platoon leader in the 1st Battalion, 5th Infantry Regiment, 1st Stryker Brigade Combat Team, 25th Infantry Division.