

The SFAB: A Lieutenant's Experience

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As I inprocessed into the 2nd Security Force Assistance Brigade (SFAB) at Fort Bragg, NC, last summer, I anticipated running into at least a few peer-lieutenants. It did not take many double-takes and greetings of “So, you’re the LT,” before I realized that I was the singular variable in the 2nd SFAB’s lieutenant trial experiment. I immediately assumed that my relative inexperience would be a great weakness here, but I was wrong. SFAB is structured so that everyone adds a niche capability to the team, one’s unconventional experiences become his or her value-added. I was not even in the organization for two weeks when I walked in on a battalion meeting at the tactical operations center (TOC) during a live-fire exercise (LFX). CSM Jacob D. Provence immediately turned to me and said, “Sir, I’m so glad you’re here. You know why? Because you’ve got fresh eyes. Tell us what you think about this [situation].” Now a whole room of senior or at least disparately experienced Soldiers stare at you expecting you to provide them with something worthwhile. That’s what it is to be an advisor.

Fast forward to present-day North Africa where I am partnered with the commander of a foreign special forces battalion against al Qaeda and ISIS-affiliate terrorist cells. More than broadening, the SFAB experience is the definition of mutual force multiplication. Our allies receive our assistance, and advisors gain invaluable experience at echelons of responsibility implausible in any other conventional assignment. Then we bring that experience with us back into the regular force.

After growing up with the backdrop of the Global War on Terrorism (GWOT) for 20 years, today’s combat arms junior officers did not commission in the hope of deploying to Fort Irwin, CA; Fort Polk, LA; or Hohenfels, Germany. Many even based post preferences off of who was on the patch chart. Make no mistake, I loved my time in the 101st Airborne Division. What Infantry LT could ask for more than 15 months as a platoon leader, a few free reps as an assistant operations officer, and

the scope of responsibility of a headquarters and headquarters company executive officer (XO)? I experienced the breadth and depth of leadership styles, a Joint Readiness Training Center Rotation (JRTC) rotation, and even some training with the 5th Special Forces Group and 75th Ranger Regiment. But completing a training cycle just to start a new training cycle is not exactly motivating. So, when I received an offer to broaden with the 2nd SFAB as it geared up to deploy across Africa, I seized it.

My former brigade in the 101st did not deploy while I was with them. That is a great thing for our country, but I nonetheless felt like I had missed out, both in how I had anticipated serving and on the tactically and logistically formative experiences of a deployment. Readiness can be a dreaded buzzword. It is the strategic competition mission of the brigade combat team (BCT) and that will not change



Photos courtesy of author

A Security Force Assistance Brigade advisor assesses partner forces at the range.

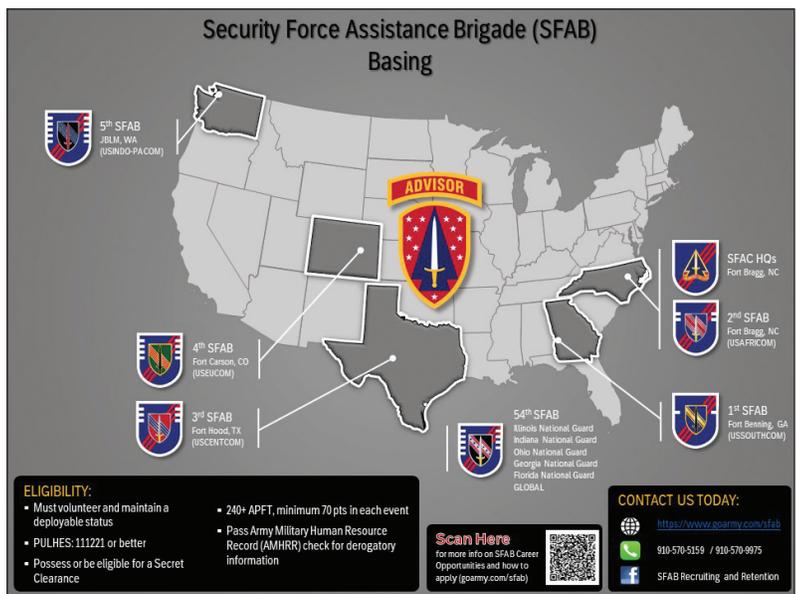
until the next conflict which could be tomorrow or long after we retire. SFABs are the only conventional units designed to deploy in war, peace, and everything in between. As the GWOT era ends, SFABs will do exactly what they are designed to do and keep moving the strategic ball down the field, while BCTs will do exactly what they are designed to do by maintaining readiness. Both are necessary and both build upon each other.

In the last year alone, the Security Force Assistance Command (SFAC) deployed advisor teams to 41 countries and is only in its initial phases of “building” its reach as our allies’ preferred partners.¹ My experiences here in North Africa and the logistical lessons learned in moving advisors, weapons, and equipment — as well as building up a footprint off of an economy — have been an amazing learning opportunity. Not only is it personally fulfilling, but the lessons learned will help me better lead and serve down the line. That is how SFAB is designed, not as a branch transfer like special operations but as a branch-complementary broadening opportunity. SFABs enable top performers to broaden outside of the BCT training cycle for a stint before returning them with the most up-to-date schooling, deployment experience, and exposure to joint, multinational, and multi-domain processes.

All things in perspective, my experience is admittedly abnormal. For combat arms officers, an SFAB assignment is designed to be a broadening opportunity post Maneuver Captains Career Course (MCCC) as either a battalion advisor team (BAT) assistant S3 or a company advisor team (CAT) senior operations advisor (basically an XO). It has a utilization tour of 18-24 months, though they employ the advisor attribute of flexibility in that as well with no additional service obligation (ADSO). Post command, SFAB mimics the 75th Ranger Regiment insofar as the broadening opportunity is for command positions at echelon from team leaders (post-command captains or majors) to brigade commanders. However, one of the greatest benefits of such a new, diverse, and relatively small organization is its open-mindedness. The only thing that makes my path here unique is my rank, not that they worked individually to bring me onto the team.

In a May 2019 U.S. Central Command (CENTCOM) article about the 1st SFAB’s first deployment to Afghanistan, its commander, BG Scott A. Jackson (who is now the SFAC CG, MG Jackson), said that “the key to our success is the talented, adaptable, and experienced volunteers who serve in this brigade.”² I could not agree more. One of the best broadening aspects of the SFAB option to a combat arms junior officer is exposure to soft elements of the Army outside of the usual BCT structure. The majority of them are more than a cut above. Learning their backgrounds and capabilities will undoubtedly enhance our ability to integrate them both on staff and in command.

As an example of the caliber of advisor I have the privilege



Locations of Security Force Assistance Brigades

of working with, allow me to introduce the only advisor on the team younger than me: our Intelligence NCO, SSG Janay D. Walker. Not only did she graduate high school before most kids are even eligible for a driving permit, but she also had already deployed with the U.S. Special Operations Command (SOCOM) and turned down the Civil Affairs pipeline to be an advisor in the 2nd SFAB. It is not just the soft skills; my team is also composed of five Ranger-qualified Infantry Soldiers. My company commander, MAJ Jacob M. Phillips, brings SOCOM experience to the table from his time with Ranger Regiment; my battalion commander, COL Christopher J. Ricci, brings U.S. Army Training and Doctrine Command (TRADOC) experience; and my brigade commander, COL Michael P. Sullivan, is a Green Beret. Such diversity not only makes this experience truly broadening, it directly enables our mission.³ Name another conventional organization in which a battalion deploys 12 teams across an area of responsibility that spans a Combatant Command with missions so diverse as to require a battalion team to advise and assist at the joint and diplomatic level, a maneuver team to do the same with an airborne commando unit, and a company team to integrate completely with a foreign special operations command. Yet here we are.

Candor as the eighth Army Value, not all advisors are created equal. With regard to the few subpar advisors, I believe it is just a matter of refining the systems we already have in place: from making advisor selection universal for all advisors, to emphasizing interpersonal tact and personal initiative as essential selection criteria, to utilizing the relief for standards (RFS) protocol for underperformers. Like all selective organizations, the quality of advisor we retain today will impact the quality of advisor we recruit tomorrow. SFABs can be the most elite organizations in U.S. Army Forces Command (FORSCOM) and are in the most unique position of then returning Soldiers with force-multiplying schools and skills throughout it.

One of the downsides of SFAB's novelty is the lack of or even misinformation on it. We are neither a BCT nor Special Forces (SF). That said, we are similar to SF insofar as we operate in small, specialized, senior, and regionally aligned teams. However, where SF trains and assists nonconventional forces on nonconventional tactics, SFAB partners, advises, and assists on the conventional side (even sometimes with nonconventional partner forces). Our mission here with a North African special forces group demonstrates the synergy between our organizations.⁴ For example, an SF Joint Combined Exchange Training (JCET) team recently rotated through to train them in close-quarters combat (CQB). It was advisors' persistent partnership, however, which institutionalized that knowledge and resourcing through sustainable training programs before, during, and after the JCET rotation.

Unlike a BCT, SFAB is a decentralized organization. It holistically employs mission command. Our mission sets are often ambiguous and usually follow the "one captain, one country, one team" structure. My experience through our pre-deployment train-up was one of an organization that actually trains to standard and not to time, and the small size and seniority of advisor teams tends to filter out many (but not all) of the time-consuming Soldier problems. There are no redundancies on the team. If an advisor does not perform, it weighs the whole team down, which is why the quality of advisor is so crucial. In MG Jackson's words, "every advisor is a great Soldier, but not every Soldier is a great advisor."⁵

What is the most underrated contribution to success as an advisor? Communication. The greatest obstacle to our mission so far has been the language barrier. It is no issue with our senior leader and officer counterparts who speak English, but that funnels our attention toward the picture painters and away from the raw reality. If my rudimentary French capacity can bridge a bit of that gap with our current partner force's second language, imagine what a team of fluent Arabic speakers could do with regard to rapport, trust, accurate assessments, and advising. The SFAB's regionally-aligned and persistent partnerships literally lend themselves to language schooling, but we handicap ourselves until it is prioritized (if not mandated) across the organization. Another option that would serve this need, incubate continuity of unit culture, and enhance persistent partner relationships is to task organize a linguist advisor per team.

While the American advisory mission has a surprisingly long legacy, the SFAB as an institution is very young. It is gratifying to be in an organization that is authentically trying to optimize its structures and systems. If you want to have an impact from the individual to the organizational level, this is the place. I hope the SFAB retains its flexibility and openness to growth; it is a stark contrast to the all-too-common rigidity and risk aversion across

the force. My very existence here serves as evidence of its open-mindedness.

Words matter. The most unconventional aspect of this article is the unqualified source writing it. Am I the unicorn for being the lieutenant advisor, or is SFAB the unicorn for inviting the perspective of its most junior officer? Either way, I am profoundly grateful for both. From deployment experience to scope of responsibility to soft skill and mission command exposure, the SFAB experience has not only given me the tools to better serve in the future, it has invigorated my desire to do so. It was an option I had not considered before, but one I am damn glad to have seized.

Notes

¹ Todd South, "SFAB Soldiers Are Heading out in Smaller Teams to More Places," *Army Times*, 13 October 2021, accessed from <https://www.armytimes.com/news/2021/10/13/sfab-soldiers-are-heading-out-in-smaller-teams-to-more-places/>.

² C. Todd Lopez, "Success of First SFAB in Afghanistan Proves 'Army Got It Right,' Commander Says," *Army News Service*, 9 May 2019, accessed from <https://www.centcom.mil/media/news-articles/News-Article-View/Article/1842769/success-of-first-sfab-in-afghanistan-proves-army-got-it-right-commander-says/>.

³ The SFAB Mission Statement: To conduct training, advising, assisting, enabling, and accompanying operations with allied and partner nations.

⁴ More on the symbiosis of SFAB and SF on The Indigenous Approach podcast between Security Force Assistance Command Commanding General MG Scott Jackson and 1st Special Forces Command Commanding General MG John Brennan hosted by 2nd SFAB Commander COL Michael Sullivan, 11 February 2021.

⁵ *Ibid.*

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The author advises partner forces during a training event.