While assigned to the 1st Infantry Division, I served as the 205th Iraqi Army (IA) liaison officer (LNO) for Task Force 2nd Battalion, 2nd Infantry Regiment in Muqdadiyah, Iraq, from May 1, 2004 until February 15, 2005. Although I have learned a lot from serving in other more traditional assignments, none were as rewarding from a leadership perspective. Forward Operating Base (FOB) Normandy in Muqdadiyah is located about 60 miles northeast of Baghdad and about 100 miles from Fallujah. When Task Force 2-2 first arrived at FOB Normandy in April 2004, the 205th Iraqi Army Battalion was undermanned, under resourced, and moderately trained — just what one would expect from a newly-formed unit in constant combat. To set the conditions for positive growth within the 205th IA Battalion, Lieutenant Colonel Peter A. Newell made two critical personnel moves. First, the TF 2-2 S3 sergeant major (Command Sergeant Major Darrin J. Bohn) was assigned exclusively to the IA cell. As a veteran of several armed conflicts including Operation Enduring Freedom, and as a former member of the 1st Battalion, 75th Ranger Regiment, CSM Bohn brought a tremendous amount of training and operational experience to our IA team. Since neither CSM Bohn nor I had conflicting duty assignments, we could focus all our efforts entirely on the IA. Second, the IA battalion commander was arrested for a litany of charges, including stealing pay from his soldiers. Selected to take his place was a young, inspirational IA S2 (Captain Thear Ishmael Abid) who instantaneously altered the command climate of the unit for the better. Following both of these changes, CSM Bohn and I assessed the Iraqi unit’s current status and established the road ahead for what would become one of the most capable Iraqi Army battalions in the country. Essentially, the majority of our efforts were focused on recruiting, resourcing, and training. All three tasks occurred simultaneously with varying levels of success; however, each was equally important to reaching our commander’s desired end state: a competent Iraqi Army force capable of securing its area of operations with minimal U.S. support.

Recruiting quality soldiers into the 205th IA involved several steps: critically analyzing the troops available, instituting stringent accountability procedures, relieving those who failed to serve, and then finally recruiting new soldiers to fill personnel gaps.
By May 15, 2004, newly-promoted LTC Thear worked directly with U.S. forces as the proverbial honest broker who would guide us through the mire of deceit and corruption to truly determine the IA troops available. Most IA officers had other part-time jobs and were rarely seen around the IA compound unless it was pay day. Accountability rosters were not only outdated, but also grossly inflated in an attempt to receive more pay than the unit was authorized. Furthermore, no one had yet implemented any recognizable accountability procedures for soldiers, so they, too, were often missing for weeks at a time.

The most effective tool to immediately determine an accurate troop strength was a rotation of every soldier through the headquarters to sign for his monthly pay. This immediately provided us with an accurate personnel accountability status. Furthermore, while LTC Thear determined his unit’s exact strength, his soldiers could see that he was the new face of the Iraqi Army battalion. This effort to establish 100-percent accountability gave LTC Thear instant legitimacy and acceptance. To further reinforce his authority, we gave him the ability to provide additional pay to those soldiers who consistently performed well and were present for duty. Furthermore, we also enabled him to repay soldiers who had unjustly lost pay from the previous regime.

Once we understood what troops were available, we also instituted more stringent accountability procedures. We found a computer competent Iraqi soldier and made him the first member of LTC Thear’s staff, the S1. Captain Mohammed had never served in the military before, but he possessed extraordinary staff skills that would greatly enhance the 205th Iraqi Army Battalion’s efficiency. By May 2004, CPT Mohammed instituted a daily accountability report that was sent via runner to the headquarters. He often personally verified the reports and demanded that the satellite companies provided accurate information. Although soldiers were only expected to work every other day due to transportation requirements, each company was expected to submit duty rosters that showed by name the status of each soldier. Another tool CPT Mohammed instituted to ensure accountability was the recall formation. During various times of the day, each company was required to conduct a muster formation and report the results to CPT Mohammed or his designated representative.

At this point, LTC Thear used his updated accountability rosters to relieve those who either did not want to belong to his battalion or were AWOL. By June 1, 2004, two weeks from the initial accountability manifest, the 205th had scrutinized its personnel strength and had an accurate idea of not only who was assigned to the unit, but also where the unit needed additional personnel.

Additional Iraqi Army recruitment occurred several times throughout our deployment. In May 2004, we used this process to address critical shortages. In September 2004, we expanded the IA battalion by one company. Finally, the addition of specialty platoons in December 2004 created another need for more personnel. Each time, we refined the procedure and allowed the IA battalion to execute more and more of the recruitment process. As a result of the positive reputation of the 205th Iraqi Army in September 2004, IA leaders eventually had more than 2,500 volunteers to fill 140 positions.

The recruitment process consisted of six stages:

1. **Military Background**: Leaders created a final list of potential or recommended candidates from local tribal leaders.
2. **Physical Aptitude Test**: Candidates underwent a physical screening that included push-ups, sit-ups, pull-ups, and running events.
3. **Medical Screening**: A qualified IA doctor conducted a cursory screening and asked a series of questions regarding the applicant’s health.
4. **Board Interview**: Candidates appeared before a board consisting of 205th IA officers.
5. **Civil Leader Approval**: A final civil leader overview and approval board signed off on the candidate.
6. **Entrance Physical Fitness Test**: Candidates executed as many sit-ups as possible during their entrance physical fitness test.

To give everyone a limited part of the recruitment process, we requested local sheik leaders to provide names of young, smart, motivated, and fit men to become a part of the 205th Iraqi Army team. These men arrived at the 205th IA headquarters where the battalion staff created an application packet for them. This packet would accompany each applicant throughout his evaluation. The physical fitness test included push-up, sit-up, pull-up, and running events. Since most Iraqis did not have suitable running shoes or enough stamina to run long distances, the running event was limited to 200-meter wind sprints. After the physical evaluation, the applicant was marched over to a medical station where a qualified IA doctor conducted a cursory screening and asked a series of questions regarding his health. After this station, the applicant appeared in front of a board consisting of 205th IA officers.

The board asked each applicant why he wished to belong to the IA and what he believed he could contribute to the team. They then collected the packets from the applicant as they departed the interview. Each applicant’s packet contained the results recorded for each station. In addition, it contained administrative data that IA leaders could use to investigate the background of each individual. Using existing IA soldiers as references, leaders would ask about the applicant’s family and general behavior. After the leaders created a final list of potential or recommended...
The author, Captain Brian Ducote, works with civilian Iraqi contractors.
encouraged LTC Thear to select a 205th IA Battalion S4. He chose Captain Mofak, who made immeasurable progress in accounting for equipment arriving in overwhelming numbers. Although he accounted for all items on a old paper ledger and in pencil, he maintained accurate numbers which allowed him to formulate future requests from the MOD. With every resourcing accomplishment, we ensured CPT Mofak (an Iraqi face) was present. Based on the U.S. hand receipt (DA Form 3161), we developed an Arabic form to sign down equipment. By October of 2004, CPT Mofak completed the “back-signing” process for the entire 205th IA and could account for every serial-numbered item — not only equipment from the arms room but also materiel issued to the IA soldiers. This greatly assisted the U.S. training cell in developing an accurate IA property book that U.S. soldiers could use to spot-check accountability.

As the 205th IA received critical supplies and equipment, the U.S. training cell continued a parallel construction and renovation effort. By January 2005, we’d spent more than $2 million on FOB Normandy to renovate a tactical operations center, four company headquarters, four complete barracks buildings for the entire battalion, a training academy, an Iraqi cafeteria that provided three meals a day, and even a maintenance facility for their fleet of 50 vehicles. This logistical victory ultimately allowed LTC Thear to centralize his unit onto FOB Normandy and significantly increased his ability to conduct operations in his region.

In April of 2004, the 205th IA Battalion conducted no independent missions or patrols due to their lack of equipment and training. It provided somewhat adequate force protection at each of its headquarters and it also manned five checkpoints with varying levels of proficiency. Most the IA soldiers believed that their duties and responsibilities only included force protection and that it was our responsibility to capture or destroy insurgents. This rationale, in addition to a lack of resources, is why IA soldiers often ran from enemy contact. To combat this mentality, we realized that we had to train the IA while simultaneously providing adequate resources.

In June 2004, when extensive resource requirements existed, the U.S. training cell prioritized the funds available to address the most critical needs first. In addition to addressing the aforementioned critical supply issues, we also initially used the bulk of the funds to establish a hasty training facility. This money allowed us to not only establish the training camp, but also provide food and water for soldiers who were attending the two-week course. The receipt of critical supplies and concurrent training of the Iraqi soldiers set the conditions for an exceptional amount of progress.

In April of 2004, the resident SF team had initiated a successful training program for a small number of IA soldiers. However, due to limited personnel and conflicting mission priorities, the team found it difficult to extend this program to the remainder of the 205th IA.

Applying input from the SF team and analyzing the current training status of the Iraqi soldiers, our IA cell devised a simple training plan to address the unit’s obvious weaknesses. Using the tool known as the Eight-Step Training Model (See Figure 1), we developed, resourced, and initiated a training plan by June 2004. The overall concept was to develop a training facility with a capacity of 100 Iraqi Army soldiers. Two platoons at a time were soon rotating through the 205th IA Basic Training Academy. We created a program that lasted for 16 days and focused our efforts on training critical individual and squad tasks like basic rifle marksmanship, individual movement techniques, and the squad attack. We also incorporated the SF team into the training concept where they trained designated “critical skills,” such as basic rifle marksmanship. During this “critical skills” training, we intentionally kept the student-to-cadre ratio extremely low to ensure each IA soldier received quality instruction from the SF experts. During the two weeks of training, Iraqi soldiers slept in four cloth tents and ate from a makeshift kitchen. The two-week program also included physical fitness sessions each morning and classes and exercises throughout the day. Since our interpreters at the training camp couldn’t always translate well, the U.S. training cell found that practical exercises, simple statements, and plastic army men got our message across extremely effectively.

When the Iraqi training center expanded to two platoons, the U.S. training cell grew to include two E6s (Staff Sergeants Raymond Wray and Heath McLaughlin) and one E7 (Sergeant First Class Luis Aguilar) to execute this two-week training curriculum. The NCOs spent long hours at this camp nestled in the foothills near the Diyala River. Their dedication to the program allowed it to flourish and maintain the highest standards. These exceptional trainers remained with the IA training cell as it expanded. Over time, these professional U.S. Soldiers would witness
the training center evolve from some cloth tents by the river into a 10-classroom renovated complex complete with computers, projectors, desks, and barracks.

Like any other job, being a part of the U.S. training cell had advantages and disadvantages. Our days were filled with long work hours during which we dealt with some below-average Iraqi Army soldiers. We also dealt firsthand with corruption in the Iraqi Army ranks and frequently encountered Iraqi soldiers who were dissatisfied with promotion, taskings, and especially pay. The U.S. training cell could rarely resolve such issues. However, we became experts at focusing these young soldiers on the tasks at hand and reassuring them that their patience would pay off in the long run. The advantages of working as a member of the U.S. training cell far outweighed any negative experiences. Never have we met a group of people who responded so well to genuine and positive leadership. Iraqis are looking for leaders to coach, mentor, and develop them. As they realized that our training cell sincerely cared about their well-being, they responded tremendously. They often put forth an effort that rivaled that of American Soldiers. Starting with little equipment and a small base of knowledge, these soldiers committed themselves to learning their profession. The U.S. training cell was often humbled by their dedication.

In addition to the Iraqi Army soldiers, the U.S. training cell also recruited a group of former, professional Iraqi soldiers to attend the course. Our training cell later used these civilians to form a cadre responsible for training the Iraqi Army. These civilians not only attended the training camp, but they also shadowed the U.S. training cell for more than a month. After they were individually certified, they were then authorized to teach classes previously instructed by our cadre.

Despite initial difficulties with students giving the proper respect to the civilian instructors, this competent, well-trained cadre proved to be an extremely effective tool. Most Iraqi soldiers responded better to instruction from fellow Iraqis. In addition, the soldiers seemed to grasp concepts quicker when they didn’t need an interpreter. By November 2004, this cadre doubled in size to 24 and assumed responsibility for training the entire 32nd IA Brigade in addition to the 205th IA Battalion.

The development of the IA had to be a “total process” in which everyone had an Iraqi counterpart. In conjunction with this developmental progression, IA platoons that graduated from the training course would then be assigned to U.S. units to conduct joint patrols. Task Force 2-2 as a whole could then coach, mentor, and develop the IA on all echelons. To reinforce this total process mentality, our cell consistently informed U.S. company commanders in Task Force 2-2 about the IA’s progress. Our cell invited all leaders to visit the training facility as much as possible. We provided detailed updates during training meetings, battle

---

**Figure 1 - Eight-Step Training Model**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>PLAN</th>
<th>TRAIN LEADERS</th>
<th>RECON</th>
<th>ISSUE OPORD</th>
<th>REHEARSE</th>
<th>EXECUTE</th>
<th>AAR</th>
<th>RETRAIN</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Publish WARNO 1</td>
<td>Publish WARNO 2</td>
<td>OPORD</td>
<td>FRAGO 1.</td>
<td>FRAGO 2</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

An Iraqi Army squad leader explains to Sergeant First Class Luis Aguilar how he will react to contact using plastic army soldiers.
update briefs, and even during command and staff meetings. Furthermore, LTC Newell placed a greater emphasis on U.S. commanders to forge mentoring relationships with the IA. This type of command emphasis essentially meant that each IA leader had a U.S. counterpart. To set the example, LTC Newell invited LTC Thear to attend weekly meetings. Furthermore, they met almost daily to discuss issues facing the IA battalion and recommend solutions. Very few aspects of Task Force 2-2’s battle rhythm did not include a component of the 205th IA. Training the IA was no longer the sole responsibility of the U.S. training cell, but rather the responsibility of every Soldier.

U.S. Soldiers at every level often found that it was easy to set an example for the Iraqi soldiers who had only known fear, chaos, and retribution. Basic leadership that we often take for granted was exceptionally effective on the 205th IA. Molding the Iraqis into professional soldiers was simple: be a professional soldier and they will follow your example out of sheer admiration. When we earned their trust and respect with sincere intentions, most Americans in Task Force 2-2 discovered that the seemingly mistrusting Iraqis were actually a fiercely loyal and impressionable people. Within months, the Iraqi soldiers would not only defeat stereotypes, but also prove to their American brethren that they are capable of securing and defending their country.

Based on the “total process” of training the Iraqi Army, we initiated a staff mentoring program in September 2004. The overall concept was divided into two parts. First, there was a series of group instruction classes that included duties and responsibilities of the staff officer, the purpose of the staff, and how the staff works together. The staff attended a two-week training seminar to learn the role of each staff officer, conduct practical exercises, and most importantly build a team. Second, we introduced each American staff officer to his Iraqi counterpart. Each week, they met for an hour or more to discuss various means to accomplish their staff responsibilities. Although missions and operational tempo often interfered with training, this program provided the Iraqi staff officers with at least a basic idea of their responsibilities. Concurrent with this program was the purchase of more than 15 internet-enabled computer systems with printers. A civilian instructor trained the IA staff officers on basic computer skills; furthermore, the IA officers were also tasked to create automated systems that would facilitate their respective jobs.

By October of 2004, the basic and staff training programs were in full swing. However, based on a continual assessment provided by U.S. commanders, the U.S. training cell recognized the need for an advanced training program. According to feedback derived from U.S. leaders and Soldiers, the IA seemed better trained but unprepared under fire. As a result, we developed another course to maintain critical skills and address outlined weaknesses. U.S. commanders provided this feedback when almost every IA platoon had completed the initial basic training course. As a result, the U.S. training cell initiated the advanced training program and started to cycle one IA platoon at a time through the new course. Since the advanced training incorporated more complex tasks, we reduced the number of IA soldiers attending the course to no more than one platoon at a time. In the advanced training program, we created several live-fire exercises designed to challenge IA platoon leaders and review critical skills. Furthermore, the SF team provided one-on-one training on reflexive fire techniques at the range. These exercises not only provided realistic battlefield scenarios for the IA to negotiate, but also dramatically increased confidence in each IA soldier. When they graduated from the advanced training program, soldiers felt certain about their weapon and their comrades.

**Operation Iron Fist**

Towards the end of Task Force 2-2’s deployment, the Iraqi Army had undergone a constant and evolving process of recruiting, resourcing, and training. On November 12, 2004, most of Task Force 2-2 was recovering from an arduous road march and preparing for future operations in Fallujah, Iraq. Since I was assigned as the IA LNO, my chain of command insisted that I remain at FOB Normandy along with C/2-2 IN to continue the critical mission of training the 205th IA. Although I felt left behind in one sense, I embraced the opportunity to assess the progress and capabilities of the 205th IA since the inception and implementation of the aforementioned training programs. I requested permission from Captain Adam Reese, the C/2-2 IN commander, to shadow his unit on every joint IA patrol that it conducted. Since we were using the majority of TF 2-2’s combat power in Fallujah, my request coincided with an increased employment of the 205th IA in conjunction with U.S. forces. I observed the Iraqi soldiers’ actions and their practical application of concepts learned from the training programs. Furthermore, I noted weaknesses which I used to subsequently adjust the current instructional curriculum to establish more beneficial training objectives.

After several joint checkpoint operations and presence patrols, I concluded that the soldiers of the 205th IA had come a long way in regard to their overall professionalism, discipline, and pride.
However, during Operation Iron Fist, I got an extremely revealing snapshot of the Iraqi Army’s tactical progress.

The initial report of insurgent activity that would initiate Operation Iron Fist came through the Iraqi-led Joint Coordination Center (JCC) in the city of Muqdadiyah at 0730 November 12, 2004. Iraqi civilians claimed that insurgents were patrolling the streets to demonstrate their ability to operate freely despite coalition presence. Our S2 suggested that insurgents knew our weakened disposition and were taking advantage of a potentially slower response time. The acting TF 2-2 commander immediately notified the C/2-2 commander to prepare his quick reaction force (QRF) for employment once more details of the report became available. In addition, I was notified to request a section of IA soldiers from the 205th to accompany our patrol.

As I moved into the 205th IA TOC, I noticed an Iraqi officer on duty receiving a radio transmission from the JCC. The officer had a soldier transcribe critical details, and then the lieutenant quickly produced a standardized report for the 205th IA commander. Just a few months prior, I usually received a report from coalition liaisons in the JCC and then attempted to pull together an Iraqi patrol. As I watched various Iraqi leaders do their part, I realized that there was no need to tell them what to do or how to do it. I remember standing in the doorway with a strange feeling in my heart. For the first time, I felt like I was in their way.

I moved outside to see young Iraqi NCOs bustling around vehicles that had DshKAs on homemade iron mounts bolted securely to the trucks. I watched privates check their ammunition supply and fasten body armor onto their comrades. Drivers were under the hoods of two vehicles conducting final pre-combat checks, using a checklist created by their platoon leader. Unlike earlier missions, when unorganized groups of Iraqi soldiers with incomplete equipment loads would pile into a limited number of vehicles, these soldiers were performing their respective duties as competent, well-trained professionals. Perhaps the most striking difference from the previous 10 months was that I could recognize their faces. In the past, Iraqi soldiers wore garments to hide their identity. However, they now carried an aura of dignity and pride that replaced the cloth around their heads.

As we linked up with C/2-2, the Iraqi Army trucks were full. Soldiers were eating some last minute chow and drinking water from their canteens. As I moved over to the coalition HMMWVs, I immediately noticed a similar scene. There were U.S. Soldiers laid back eating MREs and drinking bottled water to hydrate. I remember reflecting back to the days when getting an Iraqi to drink water was a difficult task. They always seemed to prefer “chi” which is a shot glass of very sweet and potent tea. It only took a few days in the training camp for them all to discover that hydration was the key to success. After the C/2-2 commander provided the Iraqi PL with an operational update, the patrol began moving into the city of Muqdadiyah.

When we approached the area where the JCC had reported 10-12 armed insurgents, an eerie feeling came over me. I noticed that the streets were empty, and the Iraqi soldiers began to scan their assigned sectors more vigorously. They seemed more focused and professional. Even according to the Iraqi civilians, the men in the 205th IA carried themselves differently. During Operation Iron Fist, their appearance and weapons posture affirmed that they meant business.

When we crossed the first major intersection along our route, our patrol was engaged with small arms fire. I remember the Iraqi and American Soldiers firing back with intensity and aggressiveness. The days when IA soldiers ran from an armed enemy were over. In fact, not only did they respond violently, but they also maintained contact with the enemy. Even though insurgents fired an RPG round at their vehicle, the IA soldiers dismounted quickly and stacked on a nearby wall. The IA drivers immediately spread out the main gun systems along critical avenues of approach and successfully secured the rear of the coalition convoy. From my position, I could see American and Iraqi forces attempting to suppress the enemy on several rooftops while their respective soldiers maneuvered towards the objective. I moved with an American squad to join an Iraqi team who pinpointed the location of at least one insurgent. As we moved across the street, IA soldiers with automatic weapons pulled security. While I was on the far side of the objective building, I noticed two cabs about 150 meters away. The vehicles came to a screeching halt and out jumped five armed men in civilian clothes. Although they did not seem hostile, I raised my weapon and let the situation develop. As the armed men ran towards us, they began yelling in Arabic. I could not believe my eyes. They were reaching into their pockets and pinning on Iraqi Army badges. They were IA soldiers on their way to work who had stopped to help their comrades fight.

The insurgent forces quickly withdrew under pressure after engaging a highly aggressive and lethal coalition team. Friendly forces never captured or destroyed any enemy combatants during Operation Iron Fist. However, every American Soldier did capture something else. We all returned from the mission with our Iraqi comrades with a refreshed, hopeful outlook for the people of Iraq. Our hard work paid off ... and so will theirs.

I have never had a more positive leadership experience than working alongside the 205th Iraqi Army “Tigers.” They left an indelible impression upon me and all of Task Force 2-2. Although we recruited, equipped, and trained their force, perhaps the most powerful enabler we provided was simply faith in their abilities. I still keep in contact with some of the Iraqi soldiers via e-mail and they still thank us for all our efforts; however, I often wonder who learned more. We may have initially provided the IA all the soldiers, facilities, and basic tactical knowledge, but they ultimately provided the one thing we could never give or build them ... belief in their fellow citizens, their country, and their future.

Captain Brian M. Ducote was commissioned in 1999 from the U.S. Military Academy. He served with the 1st Infantry Division in Vilseck, Germany until June 2005. While overseas, CPT Ducote was deployed to both Kosovo and Iraq with Task Force 2-2, 3rd Brigade Combat Team. After completing the Infantry Captains Career Course, he will PCS to Fort Riley, Kansas, and be assigned to 4th Infantry Brigade Combat Team, 1st ID.