



CompanyCommand

Building Combat-Ready Teams



To: Company Commanders, many of whom support or will serve on a MiTT

From: Company Commanders who have MiTT experience

Training Iraqi Security Forces (ISF) is a critical mission for our Army, and thousands of us are involved in the effort. This mission presents new and unfamiliar challenges. If we are to succeed, we must learn quickly from our own experiences and from those of our fellow ISF advisors. We have to work together as a profession.

One past company commander and current CompanyCommand forum member is providing an example of how we can become more effective military transition team (MiTT) advisors while still in the experience, individually and collectively. Maj. Rob Thornton of MiTT 5825

in Mosul, Iraq, advises the XO and S-3 of an Iraqi Army battalion (IA BN). When Rob commanded two companies in the 25th Infantry Division several years ago, he recorded and shared his experiences in the "CDR's Log" section of the CompanyCommand professional forum. For the past 10 months, Rob has been keeping a log of his experiences as a MiTT advisor. His log provides a window—not only into the day-to-day lessons learned from advising an Iraqi Army unit, but also into the soul of a professional Soldier. This month, we share a few excerpts from Rob's numerous posts in his Company Command CDR's Log, including his photos.

CDR's Log: Thoughts of a MiTT Leader in Iraq

By Rob Thornton

Establishing the Relationship Between You (the Advisor) and the IA

Sun., May 21, 2006; 3:12 A.M.—Since I have not seen a manual on advising, (although there are certainly memoirs, such as T.E. Lawrence's), a lot of what I've done so far as an advisor is feel my way through it. While we were at Taji [at the Counterinsurgency Academy], there was one class that stood out above all; it was taught by a contractor named Robbie Robinson, who has vast experience as an advisor (back to Vietnam, El Salvador and various Arab states). Robbie said that cultural variances and nuances can be boiled down to respect for the golden rule. So far (remember I'm only about a month living with my IA BN), I've found this to be 100 percent correct. Cultural *faux pas* are overlooked in light of demonstrated sincerity and honesty.

What I've found so far is that it is not so much a difference in East/West, but

rather in our "Military Type-A, Larry the Cable Man 'Get 'er done'" approach contrasted with a culture that places immense value on relationships and hospitality. I've decided to keep up front in my mind that although I'll depart this BN in about 10 months, the IA soldiers will continue to remain here fighting the fight until it's done. They have to have a sustained, long-term approach that works for them. Keeping this in mind and discussing it with them will demonstrate that you understand their problem and their concerns.



1SG John Thomas, center, is flanked by an interpreter on the left and an IA scout on the right. The scout/sniper led a three-man team that took out one AIF and neutralized a five-man IED cell.

Photographs by Maj. Rob Thornton



Getting set up for Iraqi payday—no direct deposit here. “Payday” lasts days at a time.

For example, when they go on leave (one week out of four—and generally leaders get less or must distribute their days) they must travel home through contested space. Sometimes they are mistaken for AIF (Anti-Iraqi Forces) since they carry weapons through Coalition or other ISF battlespace. They go home to take care of the business of running their family—ISF pay is in cash; there is no direct deposit. Often, AIF are waiting to kill them and their families on leave. When they return to duty, their families are under constant threat, and this weighs heavily on their minds. They have much at risk, and understanding it and discussing the risks they take shows sincerity on your part.

Most of us know that tribal influences for the most part have greater influence than ethereal, philosophical ideals and nationalistic aspirations. I honestly have not even seen the Kurdish IA officers here place an independent Kurdistan above a secure Iraq for their family, but I’ve also seen a small group of officers within this BN who are beginning to view military professionalism in their peers as equally important. This shows progress in the professionalization of their military.

It’s good to sit down with your IA counterparts (you’ll be advising more than one) and just shoot the breeze, drink chai (or Coke, water, coffee) and smoke a cigar or cigarette

(if you smoke). Bottom line is: you’ll find you have a great deal in common. Soldiers are soldiers, with soldier-type problems. Just be sincere, follow the golden rule, and remember that, when being solutions oriented, any approach has to be one that the IA is resourced to execute and can sustain after we’re gone.

Positive Little Things Can Add Up

Sat., May 27, 2006; 1:51 A.M.—There seems to be all kinds of opportunities in this job to make a difference. There is the big stuff like helping the staff do analysis or providing Coalition effects during execution for their operations, but there is also the opportunity to subtly bring about change through small efforts. Our senior MiTT TM NCO, 1SG John Thomas, and our S-4 NCO, SSG Rhodes, are doing just that.

The equipment that the IA gets often comes without any training manuals, training, or CL IX repair support. We have some great five-ton trucks. They are Russian and basically have the same transmission as tractor trailers. The BN got these trucks back in 2005, but because no training was given with them, the IA soldiers tore the clutches out of most of them. From there they sat idle and the batteries went dead. Some of these trucks have four-ton cranes on

them. They would enhance the BN's ability in many ways if they could get them operational.

Here is where the American soldier's tenacity, stubbornness and will to solve problems out of spite (the "don't-let-the-bastards-win" mentality) come in. On a very personal level, 1SG Thomas and SSG Rhodes have been down turning wrenches with the mechanics. When the mechanics said the trucks would not run, 1SG Thomas and SSG Rhodes got two of them up, although the one with the crane will only go in reverse since the clutch is torn out. Yesterday, they said the crane cannot be fixed, so we tinkered with it until we got a feel for the problem. SSG Rhodes promptly came back and contacted the Russian company by e-mail. He is a man on a mission!

The point is, our actions influence others and also enhance or detract from our ability to influence. If we put forward a positive, can-do attitude it is contagious. In this way I find that it is not very different from when I was a CO CDR. There is also the personal satisfaction of small victories. You could potentially say that things are not in your lane or are outside the scope of your responsibilities, but examples of leadership are what is needed most. This does not mean



A Kraz 7.5-ton truck with Inman crane and Iraqi operator is used to remove a generator for maintenance.

being point man in a stack during a mission—at that point you are disrupting their leadership—but it does mean getting to know IA soldiers on a level that makes a personal difference and provides a positive example for them. This is no different from how we build teams in our Army. If the soldiers believe you have their best interests at heart, your effectiveness as a leader is enhanced. The big things are important, but the little things add up, too.

Crisis in the Dining Facility

Wed., June 14, 2006; 11:45 A.M.—You are going to have all kinds of day-to-day, “sky-is-falling” crises that you are going to get involved in to a greater or lesser extent (really depends on you). Today at 1600, the DFAC manager came to me and told me he only had enough food for the evening meal and no water or sodas for that meal. I asked him who else he’d told. “Well, no one yet,” he replied. “OK, let’s go upstairs and talk with the staff,” I said.

So we go up and find lots of hand wringing and gnashing of teeth, but no action. “What are we doing about it?” I said. “Well, we have attempted to contact the contractor, but he will not answer his phone,” they said. “Well, was there a request dropped for food with enough time for him to deliver?” I said. “Yes, the problem is that no one can force him to bring the food,” they said. “OK, who is the first person who can make the contractor respond?” I said. “The commander,” they said. The BN CDR is returning from leave.

Before I continue, you have to understand how this affects the big picture. These IA soldiers are volunteers, and they can leave anytime they want to (and some do). They live on a combat outpost, with some less-than-stellar neighbors—they shoot at us to say hello. The equipment has a high not-mission-capable rate (MGs, trucks, etc.). The pay is OK but is often screwed up (had one soldier who had not been paid for eight months—had to “almost” threaten the S-4 to fix this), the promotions are screwed up (managed by the ministry of defense). The training for basic soldiers is limited, for NCOs very limited and for junior officers very, very limited (leadership and understanding the responsibilities of the leader is the biggest problem). It’s getting very hot, and the air conditioners are at a less-than-50 percent operationally ready rate. Most IA soldiers have only one uniform, their boots have holes in them, etc. Under these conditions, when you start talking about taking their chow away—we were about to have a demonstration. However, let me say that I’m in complete awe of these guys, because even with all of that, they are still doing the mission.

Well, we fixed the problem for now. I went down and called our boss, the brigade MITT technical maintenance chief, and asked him to bring the issue to the IA BDE CDR or XO. Once the IA BDE XO called the contractor, there was an immediate response and chow was on the way. You’d think that when you pay somebody over here, the incentive is to keep getting paid; it’s not that simple. The contractor provides substandard food in both quality and quantity, but the contract is managed at echelons

MAJ Ala'a, the BN S-3, and LTC Abdul Khaleq, the BN CDR, give instructions to a patrol during an October 2006 AIF attack on ISF nodes throughout Mosul. The ISF (both IA and IPs) defeated the AIF resoundingly with little CF assistance, resulting in a huge surge in IA morale and a loss of face for the terrorists. MAJ Mark Hayden (background) helped coordinate CF aviation support.



above reality, so you can't fire him. It's fair to ask where the \$\$\$ goes. The contractor responds to pressure only from somebody he fears (there are not many). That's OK, you just need to know that, and the IA needs to know that.

If the IA BN XO would have picked up the phone and called the IA BDE XO and said, "Hey, Sir, the scumbag contractor is screwing my soldiers and I need help so I can tell my boss we've got it taken care of," then I'd have never known about it, and neither would the soldiers. It was just something he did not know to do, or did not have faith that something would be done about it. It's that absence of leadership skills at certain levels that the MiTT guys help them fill. It's painful, but never dull. Even the newest CO CDR in our Army learns pretty quick that bad news is not fine wine, and that if he needs help he'd better ask before he gets more help than he needed. Here, that is just not the case. Our guys are pretty good at the tactical stuff, but understanding how to build and maintain organizations is new to them. Understanding that leadership extends beyond the cordon and search is a little foreign to many of them. Today was still a good day, though, because they learned something.

Understanding IA systems

Fri., July 28, 2006; 6:04 A.M.—One of the things we (our BN MiTT) are learning is that the IA has systems for doing things that have already been adapted to fit their condi-

tions. I've tended to try and associate what they are doing at times based on the context of what is familiar to me. As such, I missed the boat on some things and have since tried to consider what they are doing and why, without applying my own bias. This takes considerable conscious effort, and sometimes I still catch myself.

You'll find that the IA is a very innovative and adaptive organization. Their rationale often stems from concerns you are not keen enough to pick up on (remember, they live here). I think it's fair to assume they often feel the same way about us, even when you have a solid relationship. Not all things translate well.

Now that I've been watching the BN CDR and his officers for a while, I can tell you that they are better at people problems than we are. We seem to be very linear, and that suits us, given our culture. Some of these guys can balance people problems scores at a time. They don't have the luxury of just getting rid of guys—too many tribal relations, MOD constraints, and a need to fill holes, so instead they deal with people. They do this with local leaders, each other, etc., on a very personal scale.

What I've learned is to watch and ask questions. Although we are the "advisors," you have to be careful about overplaying your role. If you're fortunate and your counterpart is a good leader, you'll find you probably learn more than you teach. And before you can advise, you really need to have a

good understanding of their systems and thought processes—this is not an overnighter. We're almost halfway through the tour, and I feel like I'm just starting to understand.

It's not something you can just go into and say, "Tell me what you're doing." We made a joke the other day about embeds being here to provide excellence through osmosis. It may be that there has to be some "reverse osmosis" first so you can understand ground truth. This really helps with reporting on the IA unit you are looking at.

Don't waste your time telling yourself how screwed up they are, and wringing your hands because they won't adopt your system; instead, spend some time analyzing what you see, and consider it in the context of the conditions.

Between a Rock and a Hard Place

Sat., Sept. 3, 2006; 2:28 P.M.—There are going to be times when you feel like you just can't win. Last night, one of our RTOs (provided by our Coalition Forces partner unit) came and knocked on my door at 0230 and told me the Coalition partner battalion was asking for me on the radio. What had happened? The Coalition had a strong lead on a possible target in our IA BN's AOR—a 10-digit grid and make, model, color and distinguishing characteristics of the vehicle, but the IA would not go and check it out, citing that the IA DIV had tasked them to the bone and they had no patrols left. I went and talked to the IA BN S-3 and tried to explain that it was OK to break down one of the division-mandated static TCPs for the hour it might take to check this out, but he was adamant about executing division-level guidance to the T. As a result, the BN missed an opportunity.

I finally went back downstairs and explained to the CF partner that the mission was not going to happen. I felt bad for the IA because I knew the S-3 knew it was the wrong answer; he knew the right answer was to go and check it out, but he felt like his hands were tied. I woke up the next morning and tried to make sense of it. My fix is to come up with a commander's critical information requirement where the BN CDR is notified and either makes the call or gets in touch with the BDE CDR, but even that is only treating a symptom of the problem.

The problem is the "professionalization" of the Army, a slow process (slow when you know you only have a year to make as big a dent as possible and want to see the IA succeed) that at times defies words to describe your frustration. "Why," you ask, "can't they just have a quick reaction force always ready to roll within five to 10 minutes?" The answer is that they are just not there yet. The only upside is knowing how far they have come in a relatively short time,

seeing some of the improvements in just six months and knowing that I'm seeing more and more Iraqi Army soldiers who want to succeed.

I just have to get over the fact that what we consider easy for us is not for them. The other day I had to call out the BDE S-3 in the IA BDE targeting meeting because he was adamant that the exact locations provided by the DIV for TCPs be executed. We spent 15 minutes explaining the problems with adhering to haphazard grids provided by a DIV staff officer for static TCPs, and why allowing subordinate commanders to exercise flexibility within the higher echelon commander's intent was better. I still don't think he believed us, but because the various IA BN MiTT S-3 advisors and the CF partner gangpiled him, he caved. It was an argument I was just not willing to lose because of the importance of it—and I was just plain tired of the micromanagement.



LTC Abdul Khaleq, IA BN CDR, talks to a group detained from a local mosque for having AIF propaganda in their possession. The BN CDR knew that detaining them further would be counterproductive, so he used the opportunity to get out his message. The IA increasingly understands the value of good IO to counter the AIF messages and to win public support.

That is what I mean by "easy for us, not for them." Much of the leadership at the BDE and DIV is entrenched in 1980–1990s Soviet/Iraqi-era doctrinal command philosophies. Just come prepared to rub your head a lot from running into walls, and then backing up and trying it at another angle. *Why* will be the unspoken word always in the back of your throat.

Discussions About Morals and Ethics

Sat., Nov. 4, 2006; 4:49 A.M.—You will find that many opportunities arise for you to discuss ethics and morals with your Iraqi counterparts. These will be among some of the most challenging and rewarding conversations you will have. These conversations will require you to examine your

BN S-2 CPT Ahkmed hands out candy to a young Iraqi boy. The IA is improving the ways they conduct patrols and, consequently, the way they are perceived by the population. CPT Ahkmed is an outstanding practitioner of HUMINT.

own beliefs in the context of how and why Iraqis see the world differently. You will need to consider why they see the world the way they do, such as understanding the long-term effects that a brutal, totalitarian dictator has on their cultural and national psyche. You will need to frame your (our) ethical and moral beliefs in a manner that resonates with them. Here are some vignette topics you can use to discuss morals and ethics with your counterparts.

Corruption. Pick a case from the recent news (it's all over both the Iraqi news and our own since the media is pretty much universal in their coverage). Shape it into a vignette that has a personal impact, so it becomes more relevant. Discuss at length its consequences at every level, so they understand the harm it does. Do not expect to come to a real concurrence on beliefs with the first conversation; instead, focus on planting the seed. You have also established your views on the subject, empathized with them by trying to understand the environment in which their views have grown and have set the stage for future discussions.

The Army as a guarantor of human rights. This is a delicate subject, but one you will need to discuss and understand. Remember, you are not advising the U.S. Army (or for that matter, any Western army). These men will be fighting this insurgency and potentially others within their own country days on end, for an indeterminate period. They may be targets of revenge for their actions, even after the insurgency is over. They have seen neighbors, friends, family and innocent women and children killed for no other reason than because someone in their family served. When they see a terrorist, they realize that the next time they see this man it may be in an ambush or fleeing from a crime where one of their family was murdered. For many, their frame of reference of a time when security was guaranteed was when Saddam held absolute power. (They tend to gloss over some of the more thorny details.) They are disheartened by the seemingly (perspective is nine-tenths of reality here) apathetic criminal justice system, which may appear corrupt or which seems to value the rights of the criminal above those of society or the safety of society's defenders and their families. They understand their average insurgent better than we do. They know his background and what he has endured before he ever gets to them. They know that the insurgent is a hard man who will use every



advantage, such as claiming to target only Americans, to claiming abuse, to using connections to regain his freedom so he can conduct his terrorist activities again.

Within this context, you are going to have to make your case. It doesn't help that the Iraqi ROE is rigid, cookie-cutter and heavy-handed. I've heard Iraqis become so frustrated with the system that they proclaim the next time they will not risk capturing the terrorists, but instead will kill them. I've heard them discuss the need for stronger techniques during the questioning of detainees. You have to argue for the problems with such a cookie-cutter, rigid application of force. You have to point out the short- and long-term problems with such solutions. Explain the consequences of a climate where everyone (or at least every soldier) is free to use violence because it seems the most expedient and most convenient. Point out that while Saddam's regime may have preserved order, the price paid was heavy, and that many innocent people died as a result. Point out that what they are fighting for is not to set the conditions for another Saddam to come to power. Point out that such conditions allow for abuse of power under the guise of public good. Again, you are going to have to frame your arguments within the context of the environment you are in. You are not trying to castrate them. Ultimately (and I mean down the road when the MiTT training wheels come off and we are no longer embedded) their solution may be something we would have trouble accepting in our society.

My point in this thread is that no one told me I'd be mentoring on ethics. The "advisory pitch" made things seem much cleaner: discuss the military decision-making process, work some effects and conduct a few after-action reviews. This is not a combat training center, and you are

not an OC. Advisory work is more like developing a team from the inside out than the outside in. You are part counselor, part staff officer, part role model. I'd recommend you familiarize yourself with a few other texts besides FMs. You might bring along a little Jonathan Hume, some Plato, some Shakespeare, Twain and the Federalist Papers for a start. Actually the list could be very broad, and there are lots of places to reference good discussions on morals and ethics. You are more than just a military advisor; you are something of a mentor, too. Your day-to-day interactions and conversations over the year you are an advisor will do more to develop and influence your counterparts than any class or block of instruction you give. The former is a cumulative picture of who you are and what a U.S. Soldier believes in; the latter is a stand-alone class that is delivered and received as such. I look back over the last eight months and I see that my most important conversations with my counterparts were the ones that developed and sparked deep conversations on nonmilitary subjects.

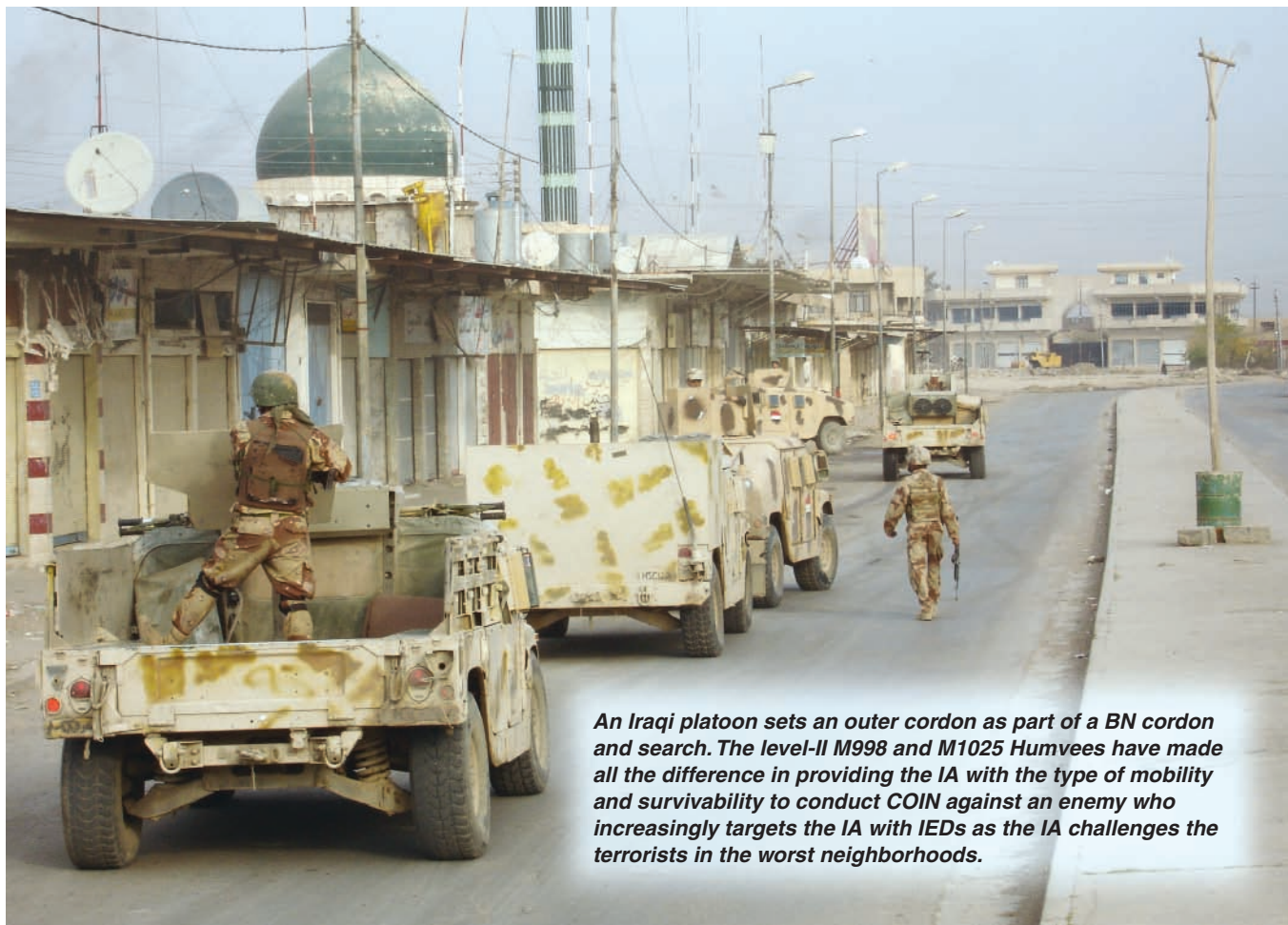
Putting the Puzzle Together

Thurs., Nov. 30, 2006; 4:14 A.M.—One of the things I've come to learn here is that few things are ever what they are claimed to be. I remember that when we first got here, many IA soldiers, NCOs and even some officers would come to tell us about a particular problem and how it was

the chain-of-command's fault it was not fixed. Cries of corruption, apathy, bad leadership, etc., were foisted upon each member of the MiTT. It was a process of figuring out the puzzle. One of our interpreters once told me that it was a puzzle they were waiting for us to figure out. When I asked him if he'd just tell me, he said, "You have to figure it out, or you will not believe it."

I now understand that "almost" everybody here has some form of agenda. It is just the way things are after three decades of Ba'athist rule in a culture that differs from ours in many ways; however, I also would say our cultures have many things in common, and that we also have agendas, but pursue them in different ways. That is one of the things that cause confusion and misunderstandings—the way we pursue our agendas.

I now look and listen for commonality in what is being done or said. I look for those things which are most in line with our objectives and seek to strengthen them. It's a long-term process, which is why relationships are so important. Today, three soldiers came to me from 4th Company. They are Kurdish and of the same tribe as the BN CDR. They were upset that the BN CDR reprimanded them in front of the Americans and their peers. It is strange to think a soldier would not know how to take an "ass chewing" and just move out and improve, especially in a country where in the old conscript army of Saddam, they could be



An Iraqi platoon sets an outer cordon as part of a BN cordon and search. The level-II M998 and M1025 Humvees have made all the difference in providing the IA with the type of mobility and survivability to conduct COIN against an enemy who increasingly targets the IA with IEDs as the IA challenges the terrorists in the worst neighborhoods.

beaten and jailed for six months for the slightest disrespect toward an officer. Now, when soldiers are free to quit without punishment and can openly disagree with almost anyone—it's a very emotive culture—these men feel their honor requires them to quit or heap an equally fair insult on the BN CDR because of an ass chewing.

So, for a good hour I explained to them what their BN CDR had accomplished for them (with minimal MiTT encouragement, I might add), why it was important to have a chain of command, why it was important to have discipline, *why, why, why*. When they tried to tell me about this officer who did this, or that officer who has done that, I pointed out what I'd seen in each one of those officers. I've known and watched them for some time (about nine months), so I know them well. Will the soldiers quit? Maybe, I don't know. But they do know now that I understand how things are. So while they will still come and ask me for things, like to intercede on their behalf, or come to say hello, these particular soldiers will not cry wolf anymore to me. They will wait till the next MiTT comes in.

Work on solving the puzzle as quickly as you can. Share the information among your team members and the associated MiTTs. The former will help put the pieces in place, the latter will give you a semi-outside perspective (like someone standing away from the wall and telling you if the picture is straight while you hang it). Be careful about making something what it is not because that is what you want it to be—an analytical fallacy. Don't apply Western standards too rigidly to someone who does not have Western values, but do discuss them and listen to what they say about your standards and theirs. One of the benefits of this job is that you will likely come to know yourself better.

Rob's E-mail Response to Reading this Article

Wed., Jan. 17, 2007; 2:09 A.M.—You know, it's interesting, as I read these posts, I realize how far along the BN has come. A few key things fell into place, and the IA got better. They were the ones who decided they were going to make it happen. I think what we provided was the rationale and encouragement. It's really hard to make a big dent in any one thing, but if you make a bunch of small dents, you still get volume. We were talking as a MiTT team about finishing strong being the way you'll remember things, and that is what we are shooting for. It's definitely been a team effort, and each member made things happen at different times that the rest of us could build upon. I'd say that next to command, this has been my most rewarding professional experience. I appreciate you putting this together. If possible, I was wondering if you could add something that basically says, "The IA BN Rob discusses made some incredible strides forward over the year, and the MiTT team learned just as much from their Iraqi Army BN family as it learned from them."

Regards to all,
Rob

Has reading this CDR's Log made an impact on you? It's striking to note that Rob himself learns from contributing. As he writes, he reflects on his experiences, which accelerates his own learning and development. Several other company-level commanders are keeping CompanyCommand forum CDR's Logs. If you are a current company-level commander, we invite you to reflect upon and share your experiences with your professional peers at <http://cdrslog.army.mil>, a topic within the CompanyCommand forum.

About CompanyCommand

CC is a place for company-level commanders—current, past and future—to connect and share ideas and experiences. This is YOUR forum—it is voluntary, grassroots, by and for company commanders and is focused like a laser beam on CompanyCommand. By joining, you are gaining access to an amazing community of professionals who love Soldiers and are committed to building combat-ready teams. Collectively, as a profession, we possess the knowledge that can enable us to build and lead our units more effectively. With this in mind, please participate, contribute and tap into the experiences of others. You'll never know the full impact of you taking a moment to share your experience with others!

Connecting leaders



Art by Jody Harmon

in conversation

The CC space is organized around the "big rocks" of command that we call "Topics"—Leadership, Warfighting, Training, Fitness, Supply, Maintenance, Force Protection and Soldiers & Family.

We also have an area specifically for Professional Reading, as well as the CDR's Log (as highlighted in this article), where commanders are journaling their command experiences. And, if you are preparing for command, we recommend you check out the "1st 90 Days" topic located in the Leadership Section of the web site. If CC is adding value to you, encourage your platoon leaders to check out their forum—a forum that is centered on excellence in platoon lead-

ership—at <http://platoonleader.army.mil>.

Send article ideas to peter.kilner@us.army.mil. Company Commanders connect at <http://CompanyCommand.army.mil>.