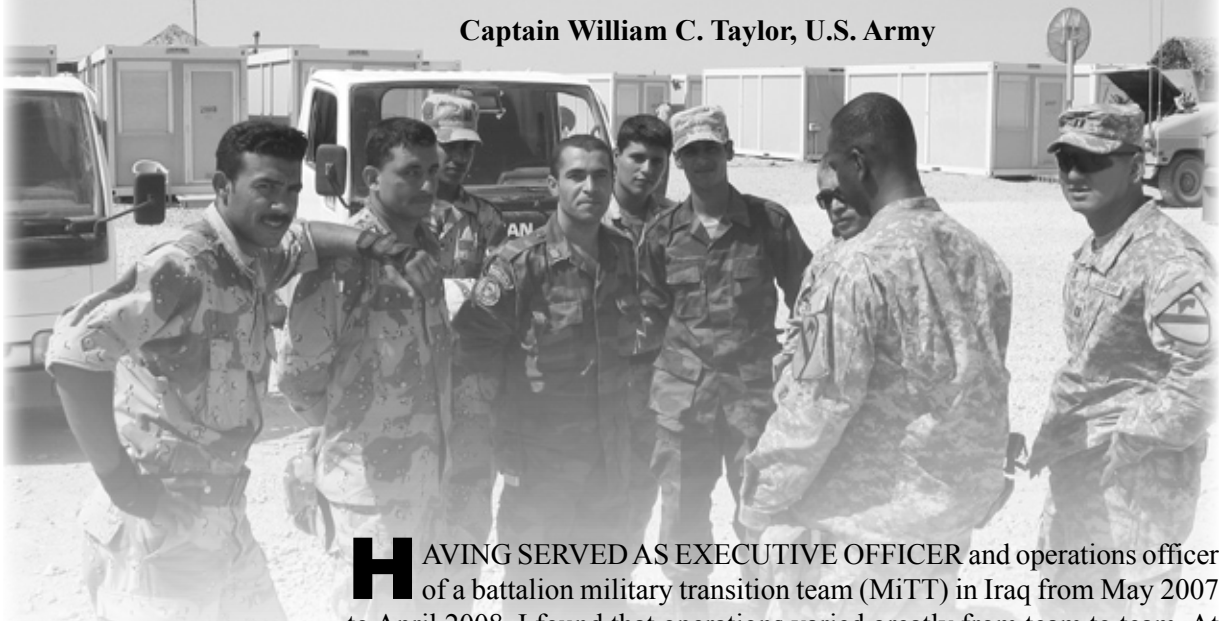


Transition Teams: ADAPT AND WIN

Captain William C. Taylor, U.S. Army



It is perhaps only a slight exaggeration to suggest that, on their own, foreign forces cannot defeat an insurgency; the best they can hope for is to create the conditions that will enable local forces to win it for them.

—John Nagl, *Learning to Eat Soup with a Knife*¹

Captain William C. Taylor served as executive officer and operations officer of 3-2-3 Military Transition Team at Forward Operating Base Sykes, Iraq. He has served in a variety of command and staff positions in Iraq, Korea, and at Fort Hood, Texas. CPT Taylor holds a B.S. from the U.S. Military Academy and is a graduate of the Armor Officer Advanced Course.

PHOTO: 3-2-3 MiTT staff members discuss logistics with IA soldiers from 3d Battalion, 2d Brigade, 3d Division, Forward Operating Base Sykes, Ninewah Province, Iraq, 4 September 2007.

All photos courtesy of the author

HAVING SERVED AS EXECUTIVE OFFICER and operations officer of a battalion military transition team (MiTT) in Iraq from May 2007 to April 2008, I found that operations varied greatly from team to team. At first this surprised me, since the mission we'd been given before deploying seemed fairly clear-cut: "Provide advisory support and direct access to coalition effects to enhance the ability of Iraqi forces to operate independently . . . advise the Iraqi Army (IA) on tactics, military decision-making process, counterinsurgency (COIN) warfare, leadership, teamwork, communications, and urban combat . . . provide knowledge on combat arms management and organizational experience."² Some teams had taken this mission statement at its word and adhered strictly to their advisory tasks, disdaining any interaction with the local coalition unit. Other teams focused heavily on liaising between their IA and parent coalition unit, and did minimal advising. Even among the MiTTs that focused on training, there were differences. Few teams, for example, dared to wade into leadership, teamwork, and ethics with their IA unit's leaders. Internal MiTT leadership varied too: some team leaders were democratic, others more traditionally hierarchical. How, I began to wonder, given all these different examples and some obvious differences among Iraqi units, should we operate on our own team?

Based on observations made during my year on a MiTT in Iraq, this article offers 6 principles and 12 lessons learned that a team might consider as it prepares to deploy. Readers should keep in mind that the advice herein resulted from one Soldier's experience at a particular time (2007-2008) and in a particular place (with a certain IA unit). As always, good leaders will adapt to address the peculiarities of their own situations.

Principle #1: Be More Than Mere Advisors

Early in your MiTT deployment, you and your team members will debate what the parameters of your role should be. From our relief-in-place experience with an entire division's worth of MiTTs, I would submit that the most successful teams find a balance between advising their Iraqi counterparts and acting as a conduit between the Iraqis and coalition units. Both missions are

essential to winning the COIN fight. A MiTT can truly have a synergistic effect on the battlespace by not relegating itself solely to one role or the other. This is especially valid when their IA counterparts are fairly competent and not amenable to their suggestions. Successful MiTTs build strong relationships with their parent coalition unit and attached enablers. We coined our periodic trips around our forward operating base (FOB) to visit coalition forces “The FOB Run.”³ Personal contact is crucial to establish close relationships with the enablers that may be at your disposal (e.g., civil affairs, provincial reconstruction team, special forces, forward support battalion, military police transition teams, coalition force counterparts [staff officers & commanders], air assets, dog handlers, tactical handler team, tactical psychological team, and Kellogg, Brown and Root). Every time our team returned to the FOB, we conducted a quick linkup, depending on our operational needs, with several of these enablers. On numerous occasions they were able to provide valuable information on our battlespace. We would all share intelligence, summarize the results of our previous operations, and provide analyses of current trends in the area. Our coalition partners would also offer assistance during our periodic logistics imbroglios. In short, communicating with our enablers created a synergistic effect that increased everyone’s situational awareness and maximized operational assets.

Principle #2: Establish a Clear Chain of Command Early

To avoid problems that can result from disagreements among team members of similar rank and experience, team leaders and noncommissioned officers in charge (NCOIC) need to establish and enforce a clear chain of command immediately. Leading a group of peers is never easy, and leading them on a MiTT is even more complicated. Normally, a major commands a battalion transition team, with captains and E-6s through E-8s filling out most of the staff positions. One consequence of this top-heaviness is a marked familiarity. Unfortunately, such closeness, if unchecked, can and will breed competition and contempt, which erodes cohesion and limits the team’s effectiveness.

Inevitably, as time in theater progresses, personality conflicts, lapses in discipline, arguments,

and shirking and dodging behaviors will emerge. The situation is further complicated by having to deal with Iraqi counterparts sometimes reluctant to listen to your ideas. Team members can become frustrated. Preparation for these eventualities is the only way to maintain discipline and maximize organizational output. Everyone must understand early on that there are consequences for laziness, disobedience, insubordination, and the selfishness that manifests itself in uncharitable attitudes towards other team members. Individual team members should be reminded that such weakness of character is corrosive and that indulging in it will lead to alienation, ineffectiveness, and ultimately dismissal. Grasping this challenge quickly, communicating with team members clearly, and managing the situation closely takes good leadership. In the special circumstances that MiTTs face, a well-defined chain of command offers the best chance for clarity. There is no room for vagueness or ambiguity in the dangerous and extremely frustrating conditions ever present to MiTTs.

Timeliness is paramount to prevent disciplinary problems on a MiTT. Be clear from the start. In conjunction with laying down a clear chain of command, the team leader and NCOIC should immediately establish an atmosphere that promotes goal setting and cooperative brainstorming and that encourages team members to support each other. The natural human tendency to question and criticize authority can be harnessed for constructive purposes through effective communication and respect. Clichéd as it seems, experience teaches that an effective team leader strives to find the right balance between promoting conditions that will engender camaraderie, loyalty, and dedication to the mission, and maintaining respect for the chain of command. Managing or avoiding the frictions that can corrode mission focus demands such a balance, particularly in the stressful conditions a MiTT faces in Iraq.

Principle #3: Clarify Roles and Responsibilities

In general, Army and IA staff models are similar. However, frequent leaves and severe officer and NCO shortages on the IA’s side result in an awkward matchup with the MiTT staff structure. Since one-third of the IA officer and NCO corps are absent at

any given time due to leaves (discussed below), the remaining personnel on duty have to take on additional staff responsibilities. Such temporary coverage makes the IA staff model functionally porous.

The current MiTT model has a commander (MiTTs refer to him as a team leader, not a commander), NCOIC, FSO (fire support officer), S2 (intelligence), S2 NCO, S3 (operations), S3 NCO, S4 (logistics), S6 (communications), medic, and headquarters service company (HSC) officer. An incoming MiTT team leader should contact the outgoing MiTT team leader before assigning roles and responsibilities to his team. At a minimum, the team leader should assign someone to be the S1 (admin), someone to be the CMO (civil-military officer), and someone to be the maintenance officer. He should also decide if he needs a team executive officer. The team NCOIC should determine which NCOs on the team will fill the S1 NCOIC, S4 NCOIC, and maintenance NCOIC roles. Both the team leader and team NCOIC should make these decisions based upon team members' past experience, maturity, and rank.

Advisors must also recognize, accept, and work around differences in military policies, customs, and traditions. As a case in point, the Iraqi leave

system, called *jaza*, complicates the already porous staff boundaries between staff sections. Iraqis will typically take 11 days of *jaza* each month. When they are absent, the IA commander or executive officer redirects responsibilities to staff members who remain on duty. For instance, when our battalion S4 was on *jaza*, the S3 and command sergeant major assisted with maintenance and supply issues. As they typically are, these moves were based upon officer reliability and loyalty, not staff propriety.

Lastly, the MiTT leader will need to clarify the responsibilities of his HSC officer. The Iraqi headquarters company is comprised of maintenance, signal, supply, medical, transportation, and headquarters staff sections, as well as the commander's personal security detachment. The transition team medic, communications NCO, S4, S2, and NCOIC will all play major roles within this company. To help ensure continuity of operations and support of training, the team leader, NCOIC, and HSC officer should develop a plan that clarifies each of the aforementioned team members' roles and responsibilities within the IA headquarters company. They will also need to develop a way to share information on a continuous basis.



Military transition team members and an interpreter instruct IA soldiers from the 3d Battalion on basic rifle marksmanship, 19 September 2007, Fort Tal Afar, Ninewah Province, Iraq.

Principle #4: Conduct Initial Assessments

Before you can effectively advise your IA counterparts and liaise with coalition units, you have to understand the Iraqi unit's strengths and weaknesses as well as the nuances of their battlespace. After brainstorming, our brigade's MiTTs isolated the following essential elements of information needed about an IA unit in order to make a good initial assessment:⁴

- Current mission set and enduring missions.
- Locations of combat outposts and other subordinate unit dispositions.
- Boundaries and the flexibility or rigidity of those boundaries.
- Long-term (greater than one year) and short-term (less than one year) goals.
- Infrastructure assessment of unit's area of operations and area of interest.
- Evaluation of areas addressed in the operational readiness assessment (monthly report submitted through Iraqi Assistance Group).
- Mission essential task list (METL).
- Assessment of the unit's ability to sustain itself, particularly in the areas of logistics and personnel (pay, promotions, retention, and recruiting).
- Assessment of the unit's intelligence-gathering capability and targeting methodology.
- Assessment of NCO development and utilization.
- Assessment of management and execution of training.
- Careful assessment of the suitability and functionality of the unit's facility.

Principle #5: Seize the Initiative

Once you make a thorough assessment, you will be on firmer ground to advise your IA counterpart intelligently and to process information from your coalition unit and enablers. Officers in our brigade came up with these concrete ways to seize the initiative:

- Conduct Iraqi Army, police, and local government joint targeting of anti-Iraqi forces. This builds trust and focuses the COIN fight in your area.
- Clarify the roles of the Iraqi Army, police, and local government in consequence management (e.g., specific actions to be taken, and by whom, in response to an insurgent attack or other crisis).⁵
- Patrol actively. As U.S. units were at the beginning of Operation Iraqi Freedom, IA units

are naturally inclined to stay within their walled compounds and wait for enemy strikes instead of proactively engaging with and securing the populace. This is a trend we broke by encouraging and supporting active patrolling and by leading the way to set the example.

- Establish local development projects. The use of Commander's Emergency Response Program funds and civil affairs programs to rebuild infrastructure earns immediate goodwill and credibility.⁶
- Ensure battalion and company training plans are METL-focused. It is very difficult to convince the Iraqis to plan for the future. Sidestep the "*inshallah*" (God willing) cliché and demonstrate the importance of concurrent training in the midst of COIN operations.
- Isolate insurgents in their area of operations. Deny safe havens.
- Decentralize your operations. A commander must empower his subordinate leaders to conduct operations with minimal guidance.
- Push NCO professional development. A weak NCO corps is one of the IA's major limitations. Consequently, we constantly encouraged our IA units to plan and hold weekly NCO classes on substantive, relevant subjects.

Principle #6: Create a Team Training Calendar

Members of teams that do not continue to train themselves while in theater will discover a sharp deterioration in their own combat proficiency. The team's main focus should be advising and supporting Iraqi counterparts, but MiTT leaders cannot neglect training their teams and maintaining basic Soldier skills. Under the guidance of the team leader and NCOIC, the team S3 should assemble a monthly training calendar that covers, at a minimum, the following items:

- Monthly: weapons range, METL training, and inventories of equipment.
- Weekly: maintenance of equipment and blue force tracker; classes on radio use, language (led by interpreters), and first aid. Leaders should also schedule regular physical fitness training and time off.

Twelve Lessons Learned

1. Have a task and purpose each time you visit your Iraqi counterparts. Seize every opportunity to



The 3-2-3 MiTT medic instructs two IA soldiers from 3d Battalion on how to apply an emergency bandage, 19 September 2007, Fort Tal Afar, Ninewah Province, Iraq.

visit, since jaza is difficult to predict and will take your counterpart away for two weeks at a time.

2. To work around jaza interruptions, identify the second person in charge of each staff section.

3. Go with other MiTT members to visit their counterparts. Knowledge and personal contacts are power. The more you know and the more people you know, the more effective you will be.

4. The S1 advisor is key to developing IA units because of his (or her) expertise in crucial administrative skills. The S1 should accompany his counterpart during IA monthly pay operations to assess the effectiveness of this key function, which is so vital to the morale, loyalty, and welfare of the individual Iraqi soldier. Additionally, the S1 advisor should get a feel for his counterpart's record-keeping system. MiTTs should consider creating a special certificate of achievement or similar award to signal progress in this area. Also, consider assigning your S1 the additional duty of civil-military officer to promote a strong civil-military engagement in your IA's area of operation. Have him create a website account to request school, medical, and clothing supplies for the IA to hand out to local Iraqis.

5. Stress NCO training. As noted above, the IA NCO corps is relatively weak and currently faces developmental challenges. That said, NCO professional development classes should be handled through the IA command sergeant major (CSM). Our experience in encouraging this initiative through CSMs had excellent results. Classes should

focus on basic and applicable skills (such as equipment and vehicle maintenance, weapon handling, combat lifesaver skills, patrolling, crater analysis, etc.). Prevent Iraqi officers from attending this training. This will show the *jundeas* (Iraqi soldiers) that their NCOs, not just their officers, can be experts in combat skills.

6. Help the Iraqi CSM get a handle on NCO promotion issues, and persuade him to hold NCO functions to build esprit de corps.

7. Put your own NCOs on display. MiTT commanders should take their NCOICs to every meeting with the IA commander. This demonstrates how important the NCO corps is to a unit's success.

8. S2: Intelligence capabilities are another crucial component of unit operations. Work with your counterpart on mission analysis, targeting, area analysis, site exploitation, record keeping, and tactical questioning. Coordinate with coalition air assets for aerial photographs of your unit's area if imagery is not available. Label all houses and key infrastructure sites to form a common operating picture. Check on detainees daily. Send out periodic intelligence summaries to other MiTTs and coalition intelligence officers.

9. S3: After you persuade your counterpart to plan and conduct METL training, suggest that he create a training cycle that rotates a platoon or squad from the companies to a three-day battalion training academy focused on individual, squad, and platoon tasks.⁷ Encourage him to be proactive in operational planning. Convince him that instead of merely reacting to enemy movements, he should be looking to deny enemy safe havens.

10. S4/HSC officer: Use the Iraqi Assistance Group website. It will help you identify the proper logistics paperwork and channels for requests. Have the IA logistics officer make a copy for you of every request he sends forward, so you can check on it through your chain of command. Ensure that the logistics officer has an organized and efficient system of processing and filing logistical requests. Persuade him to forecast needs instead of waiting for requests.

11. Medics: Focus on combat lifesaver training, daily scheduled sick call, medical supply shortages, and field sanitation. An effective way to teach Iraqi medics is to give them a handout to read the day prior to training. The following day, the team medic should give them a class based on the handout, and

he should end with a practical exercise. Once several tasks are trained over a period of time, the medic should administer a final hands-on test of all topics covered.

12. Brainstorm counterinsurgency ideas with the IA commander. Convince your IA commander to conduct town hall meetings with village sheiks and to create an assessment template for each village. The assessment should consider sewer, water, electricity, trash, schools, roads, unemployment, business diversification, the population, and its relationship with the IA and Iraqi Police (IP). Leverage civil affairs, provincial reconstruction teams, and resources from the U.S. Agency for International Development through your coalition-force parent unit to address civilian needs through the IA and IP. For example, our MiTT coordinated with civil affairs to renovate a local village clinic and build a soccer field. We ensured that the contract was awarded to a local man who employed citizens of that village. Upon completion of the clinic renovation, we conducted a medical screening program with IA combat lifesavers and clinic nurses to treat the villagers. In both of these COIN initiatives, we coordinated for Iraqi media to be present. We also had Iraqi soldiers and policemen distribute information-operations pamphlets discouraging support for the insurgents, and the people were urged to use their most effective weapon to combat the enemy—their cell phone.



MAJ Whitfield (team leader) observes as the 3d Battalion's commander conducts a town hall meeting with sheiks representing villages in the IA's area of responsibility, Fort Tal Afar, Ninewah Province, Iraq, January 2008.



The author, 3d Battalion's executive officer, and a local schoolmaster discuss the needs of the primary school, March 2008.

Conclusion

The MiTT mission can either aid or inhibit the counterinsurgency fight. A hallmark of the American military's past success has been its Soldiers' ingenuity and adaptability on the battlefield. You will need to demonstrate these same qualities. Study your situation and then find the right balance between advising Iraqis and liaising with coalition forces. Rather than get frustrated over what the Iraqis won't do or don't have, adapt—find the best way to make a function or system work. Take advice; take notes; make a positive difference.

The fruits of a successful MiTT may not be evident for years to come, but to the professional Soldier, that is all the more reason to get it right, now. Do so, and you will be personally and professionally satisfied with your work, even though in the short term there might appear to be little chance for progress.⁸ **MR**

NOTES

1. Epigraph: John Nagl, *Learning to Eat Soup with a Knife*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005).
2. OIF Transition Team Mission, Fort Riley website, <<http://www.riley.army.mil/view/article.aspx?articleId=583-2007-02-21-33387-72>>.
3. Idea taken from Team Hammer, 3-2-3 IA Transition Team, June 2006—June 2007.
4. Participants in the brainstorming session were Major Clinton Conzemius (brigade S3), Captain Aaron Berger (1st Battalion S3), Captain Yanis Cox (2nd Battalion S3), and the author (3rd Battalion S3).
5. Nagl, xiii. One of the most frustrating aspects of the war on the ground in Iraq is responding to the scene of an attack.
6. Ibid. The Commanders Emergency Response Program (CERP) allots money to coalition force commanders for emergency projects. CERP funds are invaluable for repairing local infrastructure and employing local citizens. The amount of money varies from battalion to corps level.
7. A common excuse you will hear from IA officers on why they do not conduct METL training is that they need all of their soldiers conducting security and sustainment operations. Rotating a squad or platoon through a three-day battalion training academy should be feasible given the current operational constraints.
8. Don M. Snider, professor of political science in the Social Sciences Department, United States Military Academy, assisted the author with the closing paragraph.