



A 2nd Battalion, 1st Security Force Assistance Brigade combat advisor talks to an Afghan National Defense Security Forces commander through an interpreter about conflict in a simulated town, Jan. 15, 2018, at the Joint Readiness Training Center, Fort Polk, Louisiana. (U.S. Army photo by Sgt. Ryan Tatum)

Training for the Operational Realm

A Reflection on 1st SFAB's Operations in Colombia

By Capt. Alexander Saxby

1st Security Force Assistance Brigade

While U.S. Soldiers have been advising partner forces since the end of WWII, the efforts have become more focused with the U.S. Army's creation of dedicated, stand-alone Security Force Assistance Brigades (SFABs). These units, which draw the Army's best and brightest noncommissioned officers (NCOs), were formed to train, advise, and assist operations with allied and partner nations (ATP 3-96.1, 2020). Their job is to help partner forces set goals and functions, as well as plan and conduct activities. This article suggests training guidelines, tools, and tips to help SFABs prepare for the important and often unfamiliar roles they'll play.

Major Obstacle

Many NCOs have a vast amount of tactical experience and expertise in conventional force tactics, making them great assets as they advise and support partner forces at the battalion level. However, while they are masters of their craft at the tactical level, they often are less familiar with the operational realm of a division or brigade-level staff. That's a significant gap that needs to be closed with training and practice.

For example, during a recent deployment to Colombia with 1st SFAB, my sergeant and staff sergeant SFAB advisors were partnered with host nation senior field-

grade officers on the division-equivalent joint task force. My NCOs were expected to produce results, even though none of them had any division or brigade staff experience.

Solution

To succeed, teams need to conduct multi-echelon training events stressing both internal and external functions. Internal functions are often defined as activities directly supporting the advisor team. While external functions are everything the team does to support foreign security forces (ATP 3-96.1, 2020). An easy way to think of it is internal functions are what the team does to sustain itself during a mission. External functions are all the actual advisement activities. The individual and collective training activities of an SFAB military advisor team should focus on building proficiency at the tactical level for internal functions and at the operational level for external functions. Focusing on each function independently will enable the team to shape the security environment across all operational domains.

Preparation for Operations

The Combat Advisor Training Course (CAT-C) provides a foundation by introducing new advisors to staff processes, but follow-on training needs to prepare advisors for their roles as members of advisor teams. Leaders must avoid the common pitfall of only focusing on tactical-level individual skills. While advisors must be able to fire their assigned weapons, they do not necessarily need to become snipers. There is a limited time for individual and collective training between post-deployment reset, red cycle tasks, and new Soldier arrivals. Leaders need to know where they should focus their efforts. To help understand the requirements of a new assignment, consider telecoms or other communications with current team advisors on the ground, pertinent embassy staff, and partner force staff.

Here are some questions that should be asked in advance of an operation:

- Can advisors operate several echelons higher than their comfort zone? (For example, has the senior operations advisor attended Battle Staff School or is the fires advisor Joint Fires Observer certified?)
- Will the host nation provide logistical and medical support?
- What are the security parameters or requirements?
- What echelon will the NCOs be partnered with?
- What is the political climate / does the host nation even support large-scale U.S. operations?



Senior Army leaders, Soldiers, civilians, and family members attend the 1st Security Force Assistance Brigade Activation Ceremony hosted at the National Infantry Museum in Fort Benning, Georgia, Feb. 8, 2018. The ceremony served as the official recognition of the unit's activation. (U.S. Army photo by Patrick A. Albright)

Again using 1st SFAB's operations in Colombia, the backlash of U.S. advisors operating there caused political turmoil for the country's defense minister and created an environment where the host nation did not allow large-scale SFAB activities (Woody, 2020). My NCOs could not fire a gun — even justifiably — without significant political repercussions. This scenario solidifies that leaders need to learn as much as they can about a host nation in advance so advisors will be fully prepared for any situation.

Training for Internal vs. External Functions

In order to fully develop advisors, training events should be multi-echelon to cover both internal and external functions, while also tailored to fit the personalities and skills of individual team members. A “cookie-cutter” approach will not suit the entire team. Leaders need to understand the potential gap between their advisors' experience and the new positions so they can decide where to focus their efforts and where to accept risks.

For the 1st SFAB in Colombia, the fires advisor needed to not only understand the operational needs of a division fires officer and the tactical requirements of a battery operating a gunline, but also needed to be familiar with the duties and responsibilities of a field-grade staff position. To fully grasp the extent of competencies advisors need for operations, *ATP 3-96.1* (2020) provides a list of certifications teams will need for deployment.

Training Opportunities

When it comes to advisor and team development, collective training can help Soldiers make the leap from the tactical to the operational. Brigade- and battalion-level training events should incorporate scenarios that help teams flex their external capacities. During combat train-

ing center (CTC) rotations, for example, members of a brigade-sized unit could fill in for partner forces, giving advisors the opportunity to receive feedback and monitor best practices in action. Or if timing does not align with a CTC rotation, advisors could gain perspective on higher-echelon operations by observing U.S. battalions training at home station.

Gateway training events can also help advisors certify for both internal and external functions. The intelligence advisor should interact with a senior role player from an Intel Adviser Team who has extensive experience as a battalion or higher S2. Likewise, the fires advisor needs to work with a role player with experience as a battalion or brigade fires officer. Role players who understand counterpart officers' viewpoints are far more helpful than generic contracted role players.

Training Resources

SFAB NCOs should take advantage of online resources like the Army Training Network (ATN)(<https://atn.army.mil/>)(Fowler, 2021). ATN's Combined Arms Training Strategy (CATS) planning tool can help teams identify the U.S. Army mission-essential task list that

most closely aligns with their partner force. The SFAB can use that reference to help the partner force commander develop individual and collective external function training.

Culture

Finally, leaders should focus on the team mentality when communicating with their NCOs to help create an organizational culture at the company, troop, and battery levels. Advisors who understand their function adds value to the team will be more likely to embrace new ideas and will be more comfortable working outside their comfort zones (Woehr et al., 2013).

Conclusion

SFABs play a crucial role in helping partner and allied nations prepare for the future of warfare. If the SFAB expects to continue advising division-level or higher commands, training must be focused on operational-level external functions at multiple echelons. Only then can advisors truly understand and fully prepare for the scope of the duties entrusted to them and the possible scenarios and obstacles that may arise. ■

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