

Marines Mentor "Spray and Pray" Iraqi Troops

IRAQSlogger
INSIGHTS SCOOPS & BLUNDERS

By Matt Sanchez

Habbaniya - All Marines are riflemen, but can Marines master all rifles? With security as the key for bringing stability to a war-wary Iraq, Marines are tapped to train a novice national army with a shaky reputation.

It's a clear, hot day beneath the Al Anbar sun, 50 miles northwest of Baghdad. Habbaniya is a former British airbase ceded from the Ottoman Empire after the First World War. Next to the long runways that required more space to take off are the remains of an upscale ex-pat community. The British officer—a respected position of social mobility in a class-fast society—could live a very comfortable life in the post-Great War Iraq of the 20's and 30's. The type of life where the help were confined to the Coolie Town and Olympic sized pool parties entertained the lady of the house while the husbands gathered for Pimms at the officer's club after a day of test flying aircraft.

Today, colonial style bungalows, the type that change ever so slightly from region to region in the eternally sun-shined former territories, are the dilapidated reminder of those times gone away.



Today, Habbaniya is a joint-training base for both the US and the Iraqi military. Marine Sergeant Christopher Woodard and Sergeant Patrick Ezel, both infantrymen by training, start the day planning to teach Iraqi soldiers how to control their weapons. The weapons to control are the AK-47, the semi-automatic so often used to shoot at Marines and yet neither Ezel nor Woodard show the slightest concern for their safety. In fact, they are in charge.

The Iraqi military man has a reputation for being a wild shot, a "spray and pray" aimer who never learned the discipline of marksmanship. This comes into direct conflict with the USMC "locked and cocked" discipline under-fire mindset of the Marine rifleman. When rounds come down range, a Marine is trained to find cover, snap in, aim and shoot back. One shot for one kill is what recruits shout incessantly while marching on Marine Corps firing

ranges. The art of shooting and "finding center mass," that sweet spot that will put an enemy to rest, permanently, is a Marine's goal.

Solid positioning, finger pointed off the trigger, exhaling and a steady squeeze are the key to finding center mass—to hitting a target that looks like a lying dogs, but could eventually become a dangerous man. Young Iraqi soldiers, some of whom have never been inside a classroom, watch Sergeant Ezel explain the basics with the aid of his interpreter. Some soldiers are distracted, doze off, but they should listen. With two tours in Iraq and one tour of Afghanistan this Michigan native has experienced foreign cultures far away from home, but Marine Corps firearm training is universal.

There are differences between Iraqi students and their Marine counterparts, but Ezel insists everyone can learn how to shoot, and there should be no doubt that these men will see combat. This course teaches them the in and outs of the AK-47, RPK, PKM, and Glock 19. The characteristics of each weapons system is slightly different, even the cackling of the AK sounds rougher, more explosive.

The AK-47, an offshoot of the Ak47 an offshoot of the Russian invented Kalishnokov, has a reputation for being very sturdy and easy to use. It's accuracy drops off after 200 yards, but in the current conflict those 200 yards are easily within the kill zone. The instructors handed rounds out to the young juni and it suddenly occurred to me that we were three Americans, unarmed, surrounded by ten-times as many recently armed Iraqi military men eager to shoot. I asked Sergeant Ezel and several members of the training staff if they ever felt unsafe. The answer was a curious "no", the type of "no" that really means "of course not", but still comes out as a polite "no."



This joint training facility is where Iraqi military meets Marine mentoring, an Iraqi Parris Island with palm trees surrounding the recruit barracks instead of swamps. The two factions are mostly kept apart, but they meet at the Advanced Infantry Training Center, the place where Sergeant Ezel and Woodard report to work. The day before, I went on a tour through the Iraqi side of the camp. Curious recruits peaked out of the barracks and some came close asking me questions in a language I do not understand. It's up to the Marines at the training center to bridge that gap, to make these soldiers understand, because good marksmanship will save their lives.

Back on the range, Sergeant Ezel told his pupils to hit the deck. He barked commands in Marine Corps Arabic, a clipped, barbed version of the semetic tongue that is effective for simple ideas: "Look", "stop", "fire". The soldiers dropped to the bare ground and snapped into the prone. The Marines

observe breathing, positioning and confidence with the weapon. They taught a slow steady pull on the trigger, the slightest jolt is multiplied by inches, feet, yards as the shooter pulls farther from the target, farther from the kill. Like the sound of corn popping, when all the weapons are firing there's a steady stream of bullets hitting the dirt packed berm, some rounds finding their target, others hitting packed dirt.

When the Marines first started training, they realized no Iraqi, to their knowledge, had ever found center or "BZO'ed" their weapon. In fact, the tools necessary to adjust the front sight post were nowhere to be found in Iraq. It took an online website and an American company to supply the little gadget that helps to place the crosshairs inline with the trajectory of the bullet. Now, the adjustment tool is worth its weight in gold. Shooters can consistently judge their aim and effectively hone their skills.

The students pick up their targets, each looking to find a pattern of well-placed rounds. A good group means they've applied the basics and are hitting roughly where they are aiming. Rock stars, the Marine instructors are jostled to autograph the paper targets. Najaf means they've passed, but like an elementary school teacher the Marines write "killer" or "sniper" on the margins of the riddled paper and the students run away proud of their achievement. These moments, this time of intense training is only a resting point before the real battle. There is no doubt these new soldiers will see some form of combat. The Iraqi Army and police are favorite targets and have paid a heavy price in casualties for attempting to stabilize the country. At the end of the day, Ezel and Woodard peel off the used targets and save them for further analysis. The training facility teach everything weapons handling, load unload, and how to clear stoppage, but they are always looking to improve. After the day at the range, the Marines have the students teach the fun-





damentals back to them. It seems counter-intuitive to train men that may have once held a weapon against these Marines, but with improvisation and adaptability Ezel and Woodard stay one step ahead of the learning curve.