

LEATHERNECK

Marine Foreign Advisors

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Quantico: Aug 2004. Vol. 87, Iss. 8; pg.

42, 4 pgs Abstract (Article Summary)

Chenelly expounds on the US Marine Corps' training of Marine foreign advisors. These advisors, also known as embedded military trainers, are trained at the Security, Cooperation, Education and Training Center at the Marine Corps Base, Quantico, Va. Once the trainers arrive in their assigned country, they are commonly charged with turning groups of many with little or no military experience into forces capable of fighting alongside coalition troops and eventually becoming the main military responsible for protecting their own country.

Full Text (2327 words)

Copyright Marine Corps Association Aug 2004 It is common knowledge that Marines are on the ground making a great deal of difference in the war on terrorism and the building of a free Iraq. But there are several small teams of Marines going largely unnoticed despite producing perhaps the most long-lasting results.

In an effort to leverage the number of coalition forces in the Middle East, these teams are increasing the quantity of trained warriors fighting on the side of the United States.

They aren't part of the nearly 30,000 leathernecks in Iraq with I Marine Expeditionary Force or the couple of thousand with 22d Marine Expeditionary Unit (Special Operations Capable). Rather these teams are often alone with hundreds of Iraqis or Afghans.

They are embedded military trainers, also known as foreign advisors, and the Marine Corps has established what is believed to be the only center in the Department of Defense dedicated to training these men before they deploy.

The Security, Cooperation, Education and Training Center (SCETC) is aboard Marine Corps Base, Quantico, Va. From the outside it appears to be nothing more than a small, aging building near the Potomac River. But, within the old walls, training is taking place in preparation for a significant tasking.

Once the trainers arrive in their assigned country, they are commonly charged with turning groups of rag-tag civilians with little or no military experience into forces capable of fighting alongside coalition troops and eventually becoming the main military responsible for protecting their own respective country.

"The I MEF Marines taking part in security and stabilization in Iraq right now have a vital role," said Major Andrew R. "Andy"

Millburn, the center's security cooperation coordinator, "but what they are doing will likely only have temporary results.

The Marines in Iraq not assigned to the operational forces but training the Iraqis on how to maintain security themselves are arguably making a more lasting difference. Their work will have long-term, possibly permanent results."

The SCETC is solely responsible for ensuring the teams being sent are manned with capable Marines. The staff at the center has just two weeks to teach the skills needed to be successful as an advisor in a hostile, war-torn country.

Marine Helicopter Squadron One (HMX-1), which comprises the rotary-wing aircraft that transport the President of the United States, dedicates time to accommodate students practicing making calls for fire and medical evacuations.

Quantico's Weapons Training Battalion as well as other base units share their ranges and personnel.

"Quantico may not always be thought of as an operational base, but it should be now," Millburn said. "Quantico is part of the war, and everyone on base is more than willing to help those headed downrange."

The importance of knowing everything there is to know about weaponry and ordnance is emphasized numerous times in classes. Examples given include knowing the bursting radius of a particular grenade, which easily can mean the difference between life and death.

A course on setting up a live-fire range to teach and hone marksmanship skills is taught to every team.

Chief Warrant Officer 4 R. B. Mitchell, a "gunner" with The Basic School, explained determining safety requirements for various types of ranges. He covered everything from a basic known-distance course for small arms to a range large enough to accommodate an exercise with mortars, heavy machine guns and foot-mobile infantry.

"Develop ranges, assign particular weapon systems to each one and eventually make a combined arms range," he told the class. The deploying Marines were told to stress safety in training to their units.

The unique demands of duty far from higher headquarters or even many colleagues are addressed numerous ways.

Other classes include field first aid, media relations and some basic language and culture lessons.

At the FBI Academy, which also is located on Quantico, the students learn evasive driving. Another focus is teaching how to teach.

"Every [noncommissioned officer], staff NCO and [commissioned] officer knows that to lead [he] must be able to instruct, so this is somewhat of a refresher," Millburn said.

"We're not just training; we're trying to instill certain values critical to every successful soldier: lead by example and look after troops."

Advisors headed for Iraq and Afghanistan are taking along leadership training tools provided by the center. These items include posters with the Marine Corps leadership principles written in Arabic.

Each country is unique, and training is tailored for each team depending on where it is headed. Mission-specific training incorporates lectures by Marines and soldiers who have previously served as an advisor. One such celebrated speaker is retired Colonel John W. Ripley, who won a Navy Cross in Vietnam. He spoke in March to one of the first teams headed for Iraq.

He was one of several leathernecks who served in the Vietnam War as an advisor to South Vietnamese troops. Advisors had to complete at least one combat tour as part of the regular operational forces before being eligible to be an advisor, Ripley explained.

Gunnery Sergeant Kevin W. Kyle provided his fellow advisors, who also were in training at the SCETC, with marksmanship instruction at Quantico before they deployed to Iraq in March. He demonstrated tactically drawing and firing a pistol.
(Photos by Joseph R. Chenelly)

SSgt Fernando N. Gomez, an advisor, assisted Georgian soldiers with individual marksmanship training during a stint in the former Soviet republic as part of the Georgian Train and Equip Program. This training is part of an effort to enhance the capability of selected Georgian military units to provide security and stability for Georgian citizens.
(Photo by Capt Teresa Ovalle)

"Americans expect to have a clean war," he said at the center. "The expectations are no casualties. We, as Marines, know that people are hurt and killed in war. It is an acceptable reality."

Ripley, like most of the center's guest speakers, talked about the mindset needed to have a successful tour.

"Advisors have to understand that risks must be taken to accomplish a mission," he continued. "Advisors must know when to push and when to pull back."

He offered insight on what each advisor should expect.

"You bring a lot to the fight," he told the class. "Even though you aren't a resident, and those you're going to teach know the terrain much better than you do, you cannot be intimidated by those who live there. At the same time, use their knowledge. They'll know where the good water is and where the bad water is.

"It is natural to be hesitant at times, but remember you are experienced and well trained. The very fact that the United States is sending you means you are an expert. It is yours to prove otherwise," Ripley said.

Interaction with the foreign forces' commanders is described during training by the SCETC's staff as critical to an advisor's success.

"Being suggestive instead of bossy is big," Ripley told a class. "You can present an idea in a way that your foreign counterparts begin to think it is their idea. Sooner or later it will be their idea.

"Not everyone is perfectly accepting of advice. That doesn't matter; you must find a way to connect," he added.

Leathernecks have filled these roles at least as far back as the "Banana Wars." While the center isn't new, its name and focus are.

The SCETC was just recently redesigned as such. It formerly was known as the Coalition and Special Warfare Center. Before the name change, a great deal of its efforts went into preparing MEU(SOCs) for deployments.

The SCETC's staff now concentrates on training advisors. It also tracks and supports students from foreign countries attending any of the Marine Corps' formal schools. About 500 foreign forces attend nearly 40 of the Corps' schools annually, retired Col William L. Smith said in May. He was the center's commanding officer when it became the SCETC.

The center has been called upon nearly nonstop since its inception. Operational tempo is "through the roof," Millburn said. In addition to the highly visible conflicts in the Middle East, the center will send Marine advisors to Argentina, Chad, Niger, Georgia, Jamaica, Ecuador and several other countries this year alone.

Retired Col John Ripley was the SCETC's guest speaker in March. He discussed personal experiences, gave several suggestions and answered questions from Iraq-bound foreign advisors. Ripley served as an advisor in Vietnam and is currently the director of Marine Corps History and Museums.

Other missions have included establishing a noncommissioned officer's training course in Romania. The center has even received requests to train Russians, although the evolution was cancelled before taking place.

"We have more advisors en route to the sub-Saharan desert in Africa than the entire number of advisors that were in Vietnam during that war," Smith said.

At press time, there were no plans to make the center or its courses joint.

"It would make sense to invite the Army in," Millburn said. "The Marine and U.S. Army advisors do work together in Iraq, so I think it would benefit them to do so here. The Army doesn't have a setup like this."

The center's assignments ultimately come from one of two major powers: the U.S. Department of Defense or the U.S. Department of State, according to Smith. DOD issues orders in accordance with its engagements strategy and the State Department for security undertakings.

When Headquarters, U.S. Marine Corps receives a request for a Marine advisor team, it forwards the request to the center.

The center works with the Marine Corps' Manpower and Reserve Affairs department to issue a message to all operational forces, stating that a number of advisors are needed.

All the advisors have volunteered for this demanding duty, according to Captain Mark C. Lombard, a training and education coordinator at the center and a reservist recently called to active duty.

Those who volunteer are screened at their current command and then by the center.

The approved Marines are given permanent change of station orders, according to Smith.

The enlisted advisors hold the rank of sergeant through first sergeant, while the commissioned officers hold the grades of either captain or major. Their occupational specialties vary, but most all are from a combat arms field.

The SCETC organizes the incoming Marines into teams, and each team is assigned a mission. After the center trains and equips each, they are deployed.

Mobile training teams being sent to countries such as Colombia to advise forces engaged in counternarcotics-smuggling operations usually spend about two weeks in a location, according to Millburn. The teams in Iraq and Afghanistan have been completing six-month tours with a unit.

Corporal I. J. Goodhart, a crew chief with HMX-1, briefed advisors before they boarded the CH-46 Sea Knight helicopter to practice communicating with air support.

Once overseas, the SCETC provides administrative support to the teams and monitors progress throughout each team's deployment. The center also coordinates the teams' redeployments.

The center administratively falls under the Corps Training and Education Command. Headquarters Marine Corps controls it operationally.

"We're in a global war, a global war on terrorism," Smith said. "The SCETC is charged with ensuring these Marines are ready. Marines in a support role are not usually in direct support of combat operations. The Marines at SCETC are."

In the war on terrorism and the war in Iraq, the advisors are doing more than teaching. After assembling and training a force, they remain with them through real-world operations.

"Confidence is more important than trust," Ripley said. "Getting your unit to believe you can deliver needs to come first. They will trust you later."

"Trust them, but keep a round in the chamber. Never have your safety solely in their hands. I never allowed myself to fall fully asleep during my time as an advisor in Vietnam."

At least one Marine advisor was recently cited for valor exhibited in combat alongside his trainees. Staff Sergeant Brian K.

Perkes was nominated for a Bronze Star Medal for "heroic actions" while serving as an embedded advisor with the Afghanistan National Army on March 18.

He led a 20-man platoon on a helicopter-borne assault that lasted for nearly 18 hours in the southern Afghanistan village of Maim Do, according to the award nomination. During the initial phase of the raid, Perkes cordoned a portion of the village and led a search through several buildings, discovering numerous caches of weapons, drugs and ammunition.

After observing a U.S. infantry unit take casualties and being repelled while attempting to enter a nearby compound, Perkes climbed a tree, exposing himself to a barrage of small-arms fire, to find a better entrance. He was able to identify key enemy positions and located a suitable entry point. Without an interpreter, Perkes reorganized his unit and conveyed a new plan to them.

He later entered the compound, scaled a roof to gain an adequate view and obtain a 10-digit grid coordinate and directed his Afghan troops to provide cover fire for the American forces. He later recovered a U.S. soldier who was killed in the fighting.

The SCETC sent its first advisor team, a group of 20 Marines, to Iraq on March 12 as part of the American-led coalition's goal to create a self-sufficient Iraqi national army. It has since sent several more teams and continues to train more.

As Col Ripley noted, advising is an important but often thankless job. "You may be there for an entire year without getting one thank you or even a nod of the head," he told a class of advisors.

"That is not important. You will be making a significant difference in this war and the security of the United States."

[Sidebar] The importance of knowing everything there is to know about weaponry and ordnance is emphasized numerous times in classes.

[Sidebar] "Not everyone is perfectly accepting of advice. That doesn't matter; you must find a way to connect." -Col John Ripley, USMC (Ref)

[Author Affiliation] Editor's note: Former Leatherneck staff writer Joe Chenelly is now deputy news editor at Army Times.