

Working and living in an environment under attack

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Introduction

Would I want to go to Iraq for six months as head of a newly-to-be-established NATO mission in Iraq? It was a telephone call out of the blue. As Commandant of the Royal Netherlands Military Academy and Chairman of the Board of Directors of the Higher Defense Education I was in the thick of a reorganization process to bring all officer education of the Netherlands armed forces under a single-headed leadership. Besides, I was only a few months away from my retirement. Not exactly the moment at which one expects to be sent out once more, something the Defense Operations Centre (DOC) realized; I was not ordered to go; it was a reasoned request.

After consulting with my wife, I decided the same day to go. I will not trouble the reader here with my reasons for doing so, let it suffice to say that we thought the DOC's arguments were convincing. I did lay down a number of conditions, though. To begin with, I wanted to pick my own *Military Assistant* (MA). I chose Ad Derksen, a lieutenant colonel of the Commandos, who was at that time working for the EU. I rang him on his holiday address in northern Italy. He, too, consulted with his wife, and, like me, had the freedom to refuse, but he said yes the same day. As this was a training mission, I also wanted to take along an experienced NCO who was familiar with the American way of training. Not that we wanted to apply it per se, but in view of the American position in Iraq I thought it was necessary to have someone around who knew the ins and outs of this. Moreover, an experienced NCO is indispensable when it comes to making the right contacts on all levels and if you want all the required know-how, at least on the main issues, within a team of absolutely trustworthy people.

After consulting the Armed Forces Warrant Officer, who understood perfectly what I was looking for, I chose Warrant Officer I Ad Koevoets, a commando, too, who had been working at the Royal Netherlands Military School at Weert. Sergeant Tanja Struijk joined the team. She had several missions abroad under her belt, and was familiar with the Dutch as well as American and British communication and ICT equipment. That, too, is an area where you would wish someone who speaks the same language as you do. Finally, I wanted my own security team of Netherlands Royal Marechaussee. An interpreter was not needed at the time, as NATO provided one. Incidentally, after some time it became clear that we could use some extra manpower in that field. Dutch Captain Ayad Amin, who was attached to my team in December, proved invaluable.

Not even two weeks later, we found ourselves in Baghdad. Ad, Ad and Tanya came via Kuwait. My security team was dispatched from the Dutch sector in southern Iraq. I, myself, had traveled a few days earlier to Naples, where I met my British deputy and the rest of the team, all in all some 60 men and women, of 11 nationalities, coming from various NATO headquarters. After a short but well-organized preparation, we were flown into Iraq by an American freighter. Unfortunately, the airfield where we were supposed to land was being shelled heavily, so our landing was put off several times, but at least we did not have to land somewhere else. As we landed considerably later than scheduled, the Chinook helicopter that was to take us for the last leg to Baghdad, had been assigned another task in the meantime. Only the command group could be transported by Blackhawk, the rest had to be patient for one more day, but then we could start off after all.

The first assignment

Our first assignment was to find out how NATO could contribute to the development and education of Iraqi security personnel. Subsequently, and where possible, simultaneously, that plan would have to be executed. It must be understood that this did not only concern the armed forces; they might as well be police or border security troops. Even the training of the separate units charged with securing important installations would be a possibility. Of course, we were not the only ones to be involved in education and training. Within the Multi-National Force Iraq (MNF-I) regular troops as well as a growing number of, in particular American, special training units carried out a large number of activities. Apart from that, much was done on the basis of bi-national agreements between the Iraqis and a number of other countries, among which NATO members. There was also training and education that the Iraqis carried out independently. Finally, the United Nations as well as the European Union were considering activities that were directly relevant for the NATO plans.

Our plan had to be submitted within two weeks at the NATO HQ in Brussels. As of course our direct operational boss, Commander Joint Forces Command-Naples (JFC-N), as well as SACEUR wanted to go over it, this meant that in practice we had ten days. Too little, if one bears in mind that on arrival we did not even have enough office space and the necessary transport and communication equipment. For that we were completely dependent on MNF-I, and that was also the case for our security and supplies. We were fortunate to be allowed to establish our provisional HQ and our sleeping accommodations in the American Embassy in the International Zone in Baghdad. But to be able to do our work adequately we would have to find other accommodations, in Baghdad and elsewhere in the country. No commander is happy with the idea to have to leave such

an important thing as the security of one's unit entirely in the hands of others, however much they want to be of service. And this was certainly true for this commander, who as Deputy Chief of Staff for Operations of the Defense Staff at the time of the fall of Srebrenica, had had first hand experience of what it meant to be completely dependent on others. That may have been at a distance, but it did not make the feeling of powerlessness any less.

In particular because I had put people in key positions who were familiar with the NATO requirements for such plans, we managed to successfully complete this first assignment. Fully coordinated with all parties involved and approved by the Iraqi authorities, our plan was submitted in time and was accepted virtually unchanged by the NATO Council on 8 October. It was an achievement to be proud of. That we had sometimes resorted to a somewhat unconventional approach was something our bosses forgave us. I still remember with pleasure the support that I received from two US JCF-Naples commanders that I worked with.

In essence, the plan comprised four main points. In line with the wish of the NATO Secretary General the training of the middle and top cadre of the national headquarters was started within two days. Secondly, the career profiles and the officer education of the Iraqi armed forces would undergo a complete overhaul. A new Iraqi Military Academy was to be established in the Ar Rustamiyah district, in the same location where it had been founded by the British in the 1920s. In fact, they had already started a new officer education there, naturally on the basis of the well-tried Sandhurst model. NATO was more than welcome to join in, elaborate and, eventually, take over the responsibility for that task. Thirdly, for the first time in Iraqi history, there was to be established a Training Command, responsible for all education and training activities of the Iraqi armed forces. Finally, we would function as a sort of broker in military equipment and courses abroad between the Iraqi government and donor countries.

The environment

Although we were active in other parts of the country in the exploration phase, most of our activities took place in Baghdad. This was by no means the safest of environments. In the six months that we stayed we there, we went through frequent shellings. Usually, carried out with light mortars, but in a substantial number of cases heavy mortars or rockets were used. Although less often, NATO personnel were also several times involved in convoys under attack. The five-kilometer road between the American Embassy and the airfield was attacked twice daily on average, and with that had the dubious reputation of being the most attacked route in Iraq. The route to Ar Rustamiyah came in a close second. Both routes were essential for our work and we often used

them. Regularly this dangerous situation resulted in (fatal) casualties, also in units with which we were co-located, but fortunately not in my unit. The Iraqi authorities with whom we cooperated and the Iraqi laborers who worked for us ran a particularly great risk. They, and their families, often received written death threats. Although there is no definite proof for it, I have to assume that some of these threats were actually carried out. In any case, I lost three of my contacts in that way and I had to write several letters of condolence to families of Iraqi officers. Some of them lost members of their families because they cooperated with us. On top of that, we were confronted with kidnappings of Iraqi personnel and attempts to extricate ransoms from their Iraqi bosses. Although indirectly, this affected us too, and it was exceedingly frustrating not to be able to do anything.

Living and working in these threatening circumstances has an impact on people. It may be different for each individual, but in my judgment everyone is affected, consciously, or unconsciously. Sometimes people become afraid, sometimes reckless. Some start talking more, others fall silent. There are those that cling to procedures, the only certainties they have left, where others drop them as they do not help anyway. In what follows I will attempt to give an account of my personal experience in this by means of the three roles that I fulfilled during this mission: that of an individual, a member of a team and, finally, commander.

Individual

Several times I was confronted with shelling incidents in which people got killed and wounded. In one occasion it involved people I knew, though superficially. Yet, those were not the moments that made the strongest impression on me. Strange though it may sound, the fact that the compound where I happened to be was shelled did not give me the feeling that I myself was the target. In a sense I, and I was certainly not the only one, was rather fatalistic in that. Something like: this one went okay, so apparently my name was not on it. This was also the vein in which we discussed these incidents with each other, in the realization that all safety measures possible had been taken, and there was nothing else one could do about it, anyway. I also think that this was because we were usually in rather extensive encampments, and that it is an entirely different story when you find yourself in a small location, or when your convoy is under fire. The latter I never experienced personally. However, in one occasion my car broke down and I was stranded for 45 minutes on the most attacked route of Iraq, in a spot where several attacks had already taken place. In spite of the armored vehicle we had traveled in, and the protection of several US tanks that happened to pass by, I really felt a sitting duck at the time. What also made a deep impression was the fact that a British C-130, in which

we traveled around a lot, was shot down. There were no survivors. Self-protection measures, such as flare procedures, acquire quite another dimension on the next flight.

Team member

The BSB teams responsible for my safety deserve every respect. We had a simple agreement: I determined where we would go, and they determined how we would do that. At least, if we went by road, because I could often make use of air transport. My MA saw to all the details. We had several heavily armored cars at our disposal. What was less fortunate was that these dark blue vehicles in good Dutch fashion had been equipped with flashing lights and beautiful white letters that screamed out that these were Royal Netherlands Marechaussee cars. Slightly less conspicuous would have been better. That feeling became stronger when I was informed by MNF Intelligence sources that I had to assume I was on the hit list. That has an impact, as well as the fact that on several occasions during my trips my guards unceremoniously positioned their vehicle between my car and an unknown vehicle that came too close. Fortunately, they were not bomb cars, but you never know beforehand.

Of course, we were a somewhat anomalous unit. We started out with sixty people and we never reached more than 110 men and women. Especially in the first two months, we had a high Special Forces content, many officers, preponderantly lieutenant colonels and higher, one or two very experienced NCOs, no privates and hardly any corporals. In our small HQ, we were on top of each other, especially in the beginning. If I wanted to talk to someone in private, I had to do so outside. But our sleeping quarters were all over the place. Sometimes in tents, usually in caravans, but in any case always at a considerable distance. My MA's caravan was at a ten minutes' walking distance from my own.

Especially because of this dispersion outside working hours it was vitally important that people were not only responsible for each other, but that they also felt it to be that way. Fortunately, that was the case. We kept an eye on each other, and corrected each other if someone became somewhat lax after some time. This was done regardless of rank or position, in the simple realization that everyone sometimes falls prey to this in the course of time. That is only human. So I have on occasion corrected people, but I have also been corrected on a carelessness now and then. I consider such an attitude one of the characteristics of a professional team with a good team spirit. That the American norm sometimes differed somewhat from the British, Italian or Dutch one is obvious, but we started from a formally established minimum standard for all the NATO personnel. More was allowed, less was out of the question. After an attack people of course assembled at a predetermined location and there was a roll call. Officially, this was the heads of departments' task, but in practice everyone remembered whom he had seen

and passed this information on at the assembly location. People who lived near each other checked on each other. Of course the Dutch would have a double count. First, there was the NATO count, and then the count of all the Dutch, some ten outside our group.

Another characteristic of a good mutual understanding was that everyone realized that if someone had had an unpleasant experience, he should have the opportunity to discuss this within the group as soon as possible. There was the occasional macho, but that was the exception to the rule. Incidentally, it was striking that only very few members had ever been trained in taking care of people who had been traumatized. Insofar as I have been able to establish this applied only to the British and the Dutch. Personally, I have benefited immensely from a course on *Preventive debriefing of traumatic experiences* I once followed. And what is much more important, others confirm this.

Commander

Although a commander is of course a member of a team, he is mainly seen as the commander. On the acceptance of our plan by the NATO Council on 8 October, Lieutenant General Petraeus officially assumed command, and I became his 2iC, at least for the NATO part of the mission, as Petraeus was also in charge of the training mission within the MNF. This “double-hatted” construction had the advantage that we could make use of MNF facilities even better than before. And that was an absolute necessity in all sorts of fields. Internally, Petraeus gave me enough leeway and nothing really changed; externally, of course there were changes. But usually they involved formalities rather than content.

As commander I thought it my most important task to keep a good eye on the balance between the mission's interest and the safety of my personnel. If it came down to it the mission would of course always come first, but all the same it was only a training mission carried out on request of the Iraqi authorities. The time factor, for instance, tends to acquire a different dimension in such a setting. If the Iraqi did not stick to the arrangements, I did not feel the necessity to have my personnel run risks to get things done at the arranged time. This constant assessing implied that my MA and I spent most of our time continuously analyzing intelligence data related to our immediate work environment as well as the tasks springing from our assignment and the various ways in which they could be executed. Force protection, and my means to take adequate measures in this field and thus to assume the responsibility for the unavoidable risks my personnel ran, was essential. Especially because not all NATO countries share the same view in this respect, I have on frequent occasions been very anxious about that. In spite of the support that I received from my military NATO superiors as well as nationally on

all levels, this did not alleviate my worries, and at a certain point I actually considered returning my assignment. Fortunately, the eventual formal regulations proved to give us enough flexibility on the work floor to arrive at an acceptable solution.

The fact that not all NATO countries towed the same line did have its influence on mutual relations. Especially when the number of incidents was on the increase with a consequent rise in tension, there were those who were annoyed and could muster little or no understanding for the deviant views of representatives of other countries. This would sometimes lead to denigrating remarks that could ruin the mutual atmosphere to a considerable extent, even though by far not all countries involved were represented in our units. Consequently, there were a few occasions on which I felt obliged to interfere firmly.

The Dutch quartet were in fact the only members of the unit that had been assigned for the duration of six months. So, in all, I worked with three different groups. This meant that there had to be much attention for group formation. Good and personal briefing proved to be an important tool in this. During the first few months, the group was small enough to make it possible for everyone to be present at least once a day. At a later stage such instruments as the "Internal Weekly" gained in importance. That was an e-mail, addressed to everyone in the unit, in which I gave a weekly summary of what had been reached, where we were at the moment and what other things had kept me occupied that week. Apart from being able to inform everyone directly, it gave me a sort of check on what my section heads passed on to their people. It is by no means usual in other countries to do this so extensively as we are accustomed to doing this in the Netherlands, but this was the way I wanted it to be. An important part of our Weekly was the so-called "Commander's Critical Information Requirements" (CCIRs), an instrument, which, if short and concise, earned me great appreciation. These CCIRs contained matters, which if they occurred, had to be reported to the commander straightaway. If you phrase them well, they enable you to make clear to your personnel what you think is really important. And if you can make them see that their personal wellbeing is one of them, you have gained a lot.

That wellbeing includes the necessary alternation between work, rest and recreation. One of the things I introduced after the first hectic weeks was the obligatory day off. For everyone, including myself. Those were the days you could read a book quietly and go to the swimming pool. Yes, there are swimming pools in Baghdad, although I think that the only ones used are those within the International Zone. That sometimes created a peculiar feeling; sitting by the side of the pool and seeing the CASEVAC helicopters landing close by. An occasional barbecue, a collective meal on rotation days, and regular drinks: it is absolutely necessary, especially when tensions are running high. It gives you a chance to get to know people in a different way and, first and foremost, to allow

them to take some distance from their work. I am convinced this enhanced overall effectiveness.

Conclusion

Those were the most important characteristics of the way in which I have experienced or tried to give substance to my three roles as individual, team member and commander during this mission. I leave it to others to decide whether our mission achieved the objectives. NATO has already done so, and in all modesty, we have not come out badly. The respect we have always shown towards the Iraqi, and that has always been leading in the way in which we did business with them, has undoubtedly been a major factor in this. And then, of course, apart from the factors mentioned above, there was the bit of luck, always so badly needed, that ensured there were no casualties among the NATO personnel on my watch. I wish my successors the same.