



By Gerard Spinney

Maneuver Advisor Teams (MATs) from the 1st Security Force Assistance Brigade (SFAB) are creating their own legacy. As one of the first U.S. Army units purposefully built for advising, our MAT helped prove the advisor force structure concept. We were tasked with advising an Afghan Kandak (Battalion) during our deployment and now we are tasked with developing how best to train a team capable of advising partner nation security forces anywhere in the world. Our MAT captured our lessons learned and creatively applied them to our current training plan. Advising skills are developed and tested in the field, and here's how they can translate into better preparation for our next employment.

SFABs were created to lessen the burden on the brigade combat teams for Security Force Assistance (SFA) missions. Small teams of advisors are not a new concept. The U.S. Army has been forming ad hoc advising elements from brigade combat teams and employing them in Iraq and Afghanistan for years. Maneuver Advisor Teams are different than the ad hoc teams. An SFAB has thirty-six MATs, specifically designed with 11 experienced non-commissioned officers with several different mission operational specialties and a post company command captain. MATs are the decisive element within an SFAB. Since the

formation of SFABs, there is a new standard for how advising is conducted. With more preparation, additional resources, and a structured recruitment process, the pressure is high for the MATs to excel in advising operations.

Developing the plan

We knew we had to capitalize on our lessons from Afghanistan. Initially, our post-deployment training included similar tasks and events any regular Army unit would face after returning from a deployment. First and foremost we conducted reset of our equipment and began fielding new equipment. Much of our newly fielded communications equipment was unfamiliar.

Based on our experience in Afghanistan, we identified a requirement to maintain a focus on integrating communications training in anything we planned to do. Collectively we prioritized our training objectives and started planning our training. Following guidance from our higher headquarters, our team training objectives were to become master trainers of our warfighting functions, be capable of operating decentralized and expeditiously, and that we all must be capable of winning a fight.

Master trainers

Each advisor must be a master trainer of their specific skill set. To accomplish this, we began our training cycle with an emphasis on individual skill set enhancement. Individual skill set enhancement included additional schooling. For example, our infantrymen attended schools such as Pathfinder, Master Marksmanship Training Course, Infantry Mortar Leaders Course, and Heavy Weapons Leaders Course while our combat engineer attended Master Counter IED Trainer Course. We also conducted individual tasks such as weapons qualification and medical refresher training. Our individual skill set enhancement set the foundation to continue to build our team's operating capability.

Refining technical and tactical skills provided us with individuals who were sound in their crafts, however as advisors, we needed individuals who could also teach and instruct their craft as well. All team personnel who attended a skill enhancement school were required to train the entire team in specific skills they learned. Not only did this requirement broaden the skill set across the team, it also provided our advisors with an opportunity to practice teaching their skills. As advisors, being a master of your warfighting function is good, being a master trainer of your warfighting function is required.

Decentralized and expeditiously

While advising our Afghan kandak, we identified the need to be capable of operating decentralized and expeditiously. During advising missions in Afghanistan, we found ourselves often separated from our higher headquarters and we were reliant on our mission command platforms to communicate them. The numerous types of mission command systems we owned, although overwhelming at first, became our greatest team strength. We could establish our command post and obtain communication on all of our platforms within minutes. While training, we established our command post with all of our systems during every event.

We planned, resourced, and executed an off-site training event several hundred miles away to practice our decentralized and expeditious capabilities. By taking the team to Camp Blanding, Florida for a 10-day field training exercise, we were able to conduct multiple ranges, land navigation training, and a team command post exercise utilizing our mission command systems. We successfully moved our equipment, established our systems, and communicated with our higher headquarters on multiple platforms for the duration of the training event.

Later in our training cycle, we planned, resourced, and executed a second off-site training event. We decided to treat this off-site training event less conventionally than our previous event. During this exercise we established our command post in a civilian hotel room to

simulate operating out of a safe house. We conducted our movements as if we were operating out of a safe house in a foreign country. We wore civilian attire for the duration of the exercise and practiced multiple team tactics, techniques, and procedures to limit our interactions with the general public. We continued to learn from this experience and shared lessons learned with the rest of our unit. Without our persistent focus and practice with our mission command systems, we would not have gained the confidence required to operate in such a decentralized manner. Our team was confident we could operate decentralized from our higher headquarters and survive expeditiously if required.

Winning the fight

The entire team must be capable of fighting as a small element. Engaging in direct combat while accompanying our partners was unlikely during our next deployment, however training and being prepared to fight was non-negotiable. We aggressively attacked this skill set during our collective training. We executed two team live fire exercises during our training cycle and one force-on-force simulation round exercise. Many of our advisors had limited participation in any type of live fire exercise prior to joining the 1st SFAB. However, by the end of our training cycle, our logistic advisor and mechanic advisor were capable of planning and leading a mounted react to contact under live fire conditions.

Our culminating live fire exercise consisted of a three-event exercise utilizing three non-standard tactical vehicles. The scenario included our advising team returning to base after a day of advising their partners. The team encountered a non-hostile militia checkpoint, struck an IED rendering one vehicle disabled, and lastly, encountered a complex attack triggered by a second vehicle-disabling IED blast. During the complex attack, the team was forced to abandon disabled vehicles and strongpoint hard structures adjacent to the road. The team treated their casualties, communicated with their partners for assistance, and defended in place. This training event required the entire team to be capable of conducting individual skills and collective tasks during live fire conditions.

Throughout the year of training, our team became master trainers of their warfighting functions, we became experts in our mission command systems while operating decentralized and expeditiously, and we developed the tactical skills to fight in defense of each other and our partners.

Conclusion

The United States Army found the right people, gave them advanced equipment, and provided the best training. Nearly three years from inception, our MAT continues to build our legacy. Using our lessons learned and applying them to our training is setting a standard that should be used as the SFABs continue to mature and are employed around the world. While our first employment was in Afghanistan, the anticipated future of the SFABs will take them to nearly every Combatant Command area of operations. As the advising force structure matures, the breadth of talent and expertise afforded by these small units will continue to act as the decisive point for the SFABs now, and into the future.

MAJ Gerard Spinney is an Infantry officer in the 1st Security Force Assistance Brigade. He has multiple operational deployments in support of Operation Enduring Freedom, Operation Inherent Resolve, and NATO's Resolute Support Mission. The views expressed in this article do not reflect those of the US Army or the Department of Defense.

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