

## **Combined Action Platoons for Iraq**

### **by Marcus Corbin**

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Iraq is not going well. With at least 76 Americans killed in Iraq in September alone, it was one of the bloodiest months since the war began.

Interestingly, there is widespread agreement on the solution: Iraqi security forces must be strengthened to the point where they can provide security themselves, so the often unwelcome foreign forces can leave soon as possible.

Why, despite this consensus, is the United States losing this key race? The problem is that the administration is not learning how to build effective local security forces from one of the few success stories in the Vietnam insurgency, the Marines' Combined Action Platoon (CAP) program.

Marines have taken the initiative to set up a few similar programs in Iraq, such as one within 3rd Battalion, 1st Marine Regiment, and with the Iraqi Shahwanis unit. But the model should be applied on a widespread basis in Iraq's hot zones if the emergency situation is to be turned around.

Before the Vietnam War, Army leaders skillfully resisted President John F. Kennedy's directive to improve counterinsurgency capabilities, preferring to focus on the traditional concept of applying overwhelming firepower against an enemy that would stand up and fight, as worked in World War II and Korea.

In contrast, the Marines had plentiful experience fighting insurgencies and conducting interventions, particularly in Latin America between the world wars. Hence the CAP program, begun in 1966, found a receptive leadership and institutional climate in the Marine Corps.

The CAP program put squads of a little more than a dozen Marines in villages, to support, train and fight with existing Vietnamese units defending their own homes. The heavy artillery and air support used by most US forces would be less readily available for the CAPs - a risk for the Marines, but a substantial bonus in avoiding the destruction that lost local hearts and minds.

The early CAP program gained extraordinary results. Vietnamese units that had refused to patrol or conduct operations began to do so in conjunction with the US units. Desertions dropped. The turnaround time of local units could be measured in weeks and months, not years.

Beyond the training they received, probably most important to the new military effectiveness of the local units was the morale benefit of working alongside Marines stationed with them for the long haul. The local forces knew the Marines were committed to them, and trust developed from the personal contact of living and dying together.

What's more, living near the people in the villages engendered the trust of the locals. That trust yielded the most important ingredient of fighting a guerrilla war - intelligence. Soon enough, the much-vaunted Viet Cong simply abandoned the struggle in some of the CAP areas.

The program had its difficulties and setbacks, of course, including challenges finding suitable personnel, shortage

of language training, lack of integration with US aid and economic development teams, too-scattered implementation and little focus on underlying political issues. But its successes were remarkable given how the top military commander in Vietnam, General William Westmoreland, and other institutional players opposed and undercut the program, since it was in direct competition with their conventional war strategy.

Could a program that learned from the successes and failures of the CAP program be applied in Iraq? US casualties could rise, but it is interesting that the volunteers in the Vietnam CAPs felt the program was doing so much good they often extended their tours, despite the dangers.

The main difference from Vietnam - the more urban setting of Iraq - does not affect the underlying concepts of the program. The virtuous cycle for local security forces of increased morale, better training, successful engagements, more intelligence and gaining trust from the local population should all combine to get tactical trends moving in the right direction again.

It is not enough to have a crash-training program for local forces, and to deploy US troops as backups, which the US forces are already doing. Without morale improvements, the recruits will run away just as fast - or take their newly developed military skills to the other side.

It is not enough to conduct joint US-Iraqi patrols. What is needed is true combined units that work together over time.

Such a shift in the US military focus can only provide tactical success, however. No matter how proficient local security forces are in an insurgency, political improvements must be made as well. If citizens don't get the leaders, jobs, independence and pride they want, the war will drag on regardless of an "improvement" in the security situation.

Developing effective Iraqi security forces is merely the prerequisite, not the answer, to how to win the hearts and minds of the Iraqi people.

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