

IMPROVING THE PRT-MILITARY PROFESSIONAL RELATIONSHIP

A U.S. ARMY MEMBER OF AN IRAQ PROVINCIAL RECONSTRUCTION TEAM OFFERS PRACTICAL ADVICE TO FOREIGN SERVICE COLLEAGUES.

BY SEAN P. WALSH

After what seemed like weeks, we members of the Diyala Provincial Reconstruction Team and the ground-holding battalion had finally gotten all of the pieces together to begin renovating the Diyala Vocational School. Ron Bonfilio, a State Department employee, and Lt. Colonel Ted Daley, a U.S. Army Reserve officer assigned to the PRT, had jointly decided on the site and had coordinated with officials in Baghdad and Baqubah to gain approval for the school.

As my unit's civil-military plans officer, I was the one who gained us access to the giant checkbooks of the Commander's Emergency Response Program and the Iraqi-funded I-CERP. We had even recruited a field artillery lieutenant fresh out of West Point with a mechanical engineering degree to bring some sorely needed practical knowledge to the

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process that we liberal arts types were missing.

So I had a genuine sense of hope that I had felt very few times during my 15 months in Iraq: this project would be different. It would be done quickly and efficiently and would be sustained by the government of Iraq. Most importantly, it would get the Sons of Iraq, the groups of mostly Sunni men that helped provide security and whose rejection of al-Qaida was so essential to recent success in Iraq, out of the business of standing on a street corner on the American taxpayers' dime and into sustainable, long-term employment. These new, real jobs would hopefully prevent them from returning to militias and the insurgency.

It wasn't easy, however. The project planning had taken significant coordination between the PRT and the military unit responsible for the area, a process involving head-butting, gnashing of teeth and, to be honest, some hurt feelings on all sides. Speaking as a military officer recently redeployed from Iraq who frequently works with personnel from PRTs and the embedded PRTs that are assigned to support military units directly, I can clearly see that the culture clash between members of the armed forces and State Department employees has a definite impact on the quality of work done by both organizations.

Let me acknowledge that the military is far from blameless for the fact that our two organizations occasionally have a less than stellar working relationship. In fact, I would like to see a Foreign Service member of a Provincial Reconstruction Team submit a similar article to a military journal such as *Parameters* in order to offer his or her insights on the situation. But in this article I want to provide some suggestions, from my perspective, for future Foreign Service PRT personnel on how that professional relationship can be improved.

First, let me say that I have the utmost respect for the Department of State, in general, and Foreign Service officers in particular. I interned at the U.S. embassy in Singapore when I was an undergraduate, and it was one of the most rewarding professional experiences of my life.

I also know how hard it is to become an FSO. I once took a Foreign Service Written Exam practice test and did not do well (knowledge about American choreographers is apparently a prerequisite for success on the exam).

Know Who Runs the Show

The most important thing to understand in improving the relationship between PRTs and their uniformed colleagues is that Provincial Reconstruction Team members live and work in a military-dominated environment. Whatever your personal feelings are about how State Department employees should be utilized in conflict zones like Iraq and Afghanistan, the reality is that the military runs the show.

PRTs are almost totally dependent on the military for security and movement to attend meetings outside the forward operating bases. The military also has the easiest access to CERP, probably one of the biggest foreign aid vehicles ever created. And I won't try to downplay the fact that some military personnel view civilians as "weenies," as Shawn Dorman reported in her March 2007 *Foreign Service Journal* article ("Iraq PRTs: Pins on a Map").

The best way to overcome these biases is to quickly establish a professional working relationship with your military counterparts. Toward that end, I urge Foreign Service PRT members, and especially team leaders, to conduct an introductory meeting with the subordinate commanders in your area as soon as possible when beginning your tour or when a new

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unit arrives. As a PRT member, you will frequently meet with brigade staff and the brigade commander (a full colonel), but it will be the units on the ground, battalions and companies, that support your daily movements, obtain funds for larger projects and generally facilitate your efforts. So it is important to gain the support of battalion and company commanders to help with your mission.

When you meet with these officers, explain what you contribute to the mission in your area and what you can bring to the table (or "to the fight" in Pentagon-speak). As FSO Chuck Hunter pointed out in Ms. Dorman's article, diplomats have much longer-term views of development and success than the military. If you cannot articulate the PRT's role in the short term (12 months or less), that commander may simply see you as a burden, a tasking that takes away from the "real" mission.

I would add that, especially for ePRT members, you might also consider how your goals can be adjusted to ensure that they are nested with the priorities of the military side of the house. Though we should all be working from the same page, often this isn't the case.

For instance, if a commander feels that solving water problems is the key to bringing stability back to his or her area, I would recommend that you help address that problem even if you feel that something else should be the priority. As Kiki Munshi, a former FSO and PRT leader, has pointed out, "If the military thinks it can do something we believe won't work or doesn't think what we want to do is important, we're up a tree." I feel that it is better to at least be working toward a goal together than to be "up a tree" and unable to accomplish anything.

Respect Protocol

Another key element to understand about the military is that, as an organization, it is extremely touchy about protocol. This goes well beyond the saluting and rank usage that I'm sure you are all well aware of, descending into an almost tribal structure that can be inscrutable to an outsider.

Where you as a PRT member will most likely encounter this is in arranging for transportation to your meetings and site visits. Because Provincial Reconstruction Teams exist outside the chain of command of the units that support you, some within the military consider it a professional insult for a PRT to "task" them with a mission such as movement to a meeting.

In order to deal with this bias, the team leader must work out the details of this relationship so that the military understands its role and team members aren't reduced to "bumming" rides. Team members also need to know how to properly address grievances when they feel they aren't being adequately supported.

Failure to clarify this relationship will result in significant friction between military units and the PRT, forcing team members to ask for support outside of proper channels and procedures. Units get tasked to support missions through very specific

channels that, while they change slightly from unit to unit, usually result in a daily or weekly order. Though I understand that meeting times frequently change and opportunities can come up quickly, I strongly encourage PRT members to utilize these channels as much as possible and submit requests as far in advance as possible.

In cases where an unexpected meeting or opportunity does arise too soon for the orders process to take place, going directly to a subordinate unit can be a touchy technique. If you and the battalion and company commanders that support you have a good working relationship, and they are made aware of how that meeting or opportunity will help them accomplish their mission, then picking up a phone or walking over to a battalion headquarters to ask for help directly should not be an issue. On the other hand, if a professional relationship is not already present and these commanders don't understand the importance of what you are trying to accomplish, a request that uses unofficial channels is not likely to be looked upon favorably.

The techniques I suggested earlier — holding formal introductory meetings, explaining your goals in shorter timelines and nesting your priorities with those of the commanders that support you — can go a long way to establishing the necessary relationship that will allow you to occasionally take advantage of unofficial channels.

Learn Military Speak

Foreign Service officers need to take the time to read up on military terms and acronyms before coming to Iraq or Afghanistan. The military's constant use of jargon makes it almost a language unto itself, and the fact that each unit seems to have its own slang and unofficial acronyms only complicates the situation.

I recommend that you pick up a copy of Barbara Schading's *A Civil-*

ian's Guide to the Military (Fraser Direct, 2007), which provides an excellent, concise overview of the various branches of the military, its rank structure and some useful protocol. I gave it to my fiancée after our engagement, and she found that the stream of acronyms and professional terms that constitute work-related conversations with my fellow military officers became significantly clearer after she read it. Let me hasten to add that she is no slouch when it comes to national security. But just as a physicist might not be able to follow everything a zoologist writes about, Foreign Service personnel are not trained to use the professional terms of the military (nor the other way around).

Finally, while it is a technical issue, another major obstacle to an efficient and productive relationship with the military is the fact that many PRT members do not have access to the Defense Department's Secret Internet Protocol Router computer network.

Almost all reporting and e-mail coordination in a deployed unit is conducted via the SIPR, so if PRT members lack reliable access to this network, fewer people will be able to read their reports or benefit from their assessments. If your team does not have the SIPR or there are consistent problems with access, I would encourage you to make this one of your top priorities when seeking assistance from the embassy. You may also be able to request technical support from the military units with which you are collocated.

I hope this advice serves some of you well as you prepare to work alongside your military partners in Iraq and Afghanistan. I have seen firsthand the success that our two organizations can achieve together when our relationship and areas of responsibility are clearly defined, and hope that success will continue in the future. ■



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