

Reevaluating the CAP

A viable option in the face of troop drawdown in Iraq

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During the summer of 2008, President-elect Barack Obama stated in an op-ed piece that he would like to pull the troops out of Iraq by the summer of 2010.¹ Although there have been debates between politicians and military leaders on whether this choice is the right one, a drawdown in Iraq is a real possibility within the next 1 ½ years. As a result, it is time for the Marine Corps and the U.S. military, in general, to develop tactics and programs which can achieve the current strategic goals in Iraq with a substantially smaller number of troops. Instead of developing these tactics from scratch, however, focus should be placed on those programs which have been used in the past and from which lessons can be learned. One example is that of the Combined Action Program (CAP). In an effort to counter local support for the insurgency in Vietnam with only a limited number of troops, the CAP intermixed local forces with U.S. Marines into small combat units that not only fought together but also lived and worked together amongst the local population.² In addition to its Vietnam deployment, the CAP was implemented in Iraq under General James N. Mattis' 1st Marine Division in 2003 and 2004. This program was, however, only implemented on a small scale and was phased out in favor of other tactics. Today, there are units like the military transition team (MiTT) that operate very similarly to the CAP by eating, sleeping, and living amongst local forces. However, the main mission of the

MiTT is more focused on the training and transition and not on joint combat patrols.³ Because of the MiTT's lack of focus on combat, it may be beneficial to reexamine the CAP as a viable counterinsurgency tool in the months and years ahead. Before the CAP can be redeployed to Iraq, however, lessons learned from the first Iraqi deployment of the CAP must be studied, and changes must be made. It is the purpose of this article to illustrate the friction points that the Iraqi CAP experienced and changes that could be made in order to ease this friction so that the redeployment of the CAP during the drawdown can become a feasible option.

Prior Experience of the Locals

The CAP was intended to create a unit by which combat-oriented missions could be conducted by joint forces. However, the lack of prior training among the Iraqis hindered the achievement of the mission in one of the major CAPs. After the disintegration of the Iraqi army, many of the former Iraqi soldiers turned to the insurgent groups and militias, leaving what would come to be called the Iraqi Civil Defense Corps (ICDC) and later the Iraqi National Guard (ING) with few highly trained members.⁴ As a result, CAPs like the 2^d Battalion, 7th Marines (2/7) had very little to work with as far as prior experience was concerned. The 2/7 CAP was in charge of setting up a CAP in conjunction with the 503^d ING. Those members of the 503^d who had previous experience were made officers while the rest of the 1,100- member brigade had no experience whatsoever. As a result, the 2/7 CAP was forced to establish an extensive training regimen for the members of the 503^d before any combat-oriented missions were possible. Because of the lack of training among the ING troops, the 2/7 CAP could not effectively

establish the mission of joint combat patrols and was forced to serve more of a training command function.⁵ What is promising, however, is that since the initial CAP deployment in 2003-04, the Iraqi Army (IA) has been through extensive basic training led by the Army and Marine Corps. Although the IA is by no means on par with the Marine Corps, this source of friction should at least be reduced from 2004.

Duration of the Program

When asked if they could change something about their CAP experience in Iraq, both the commanders of the 2/7 CAP and the 3/4 CAP stated that the tour should have lasted at least a year.⁶ Capt Matthew Danner of the 3/4 CAP stated:

The biggest problem is duration. We were in place for only six months. We were gone for a couple of weeks in the middle to fight in Fallujah....We had to leave when the battalion left in July. There were genuine attempts to remain in place, but that was not practical even though we all volunteered.⁷

In both cases, the standard tour length was 6 to 7 months long with each unit rotating as a whole. Additionally, the CAP mission, in the case of the 2/7, was not even established until May 2004, 3 months after 2/7 had been in country. As a result, the 2/7 CAP only had 4 months to try to get the ING ready for combat patrols. This proved impossible due to the aforementioned lack of training on the part of the ING forces. Although morale and readiness concerns may be the reasoning behind the 7-month long deployments of Marines, if the CAP is to be

successful, it may be necessary to take up the Army model of at least 12-month long deployments for CAP units.

Size of the Program

A third factor that contributed to the overall outcome of the CAP was its size. What was even more important than basic troop levels, however, when looking at the size of the CAP, was its level of implementation. The CAP in Iraq was instituted on a much lower level than the CAP in Vietnam, which many people argue contributed to its failure.⁸ As mentioned previously, the CAP in Iraq resulted from a directive from the 1st Marine Division Commander. MajGen Mattis required that all battalions under his command designate a platoon that could be set up as a combined action platoon once they arrived in country. Outside of this directive, however, the CAP received no other guidance from the upper levels of the Marine Corps forces in Iraq. Individual CAPs, like the 2/7 and the 3/4, received supporting units -- logistics and communications--from the battalion level, but further guidance from higher up was not extensively provided.⁹ This lack of strategic- and upper-level integration can best be seen in the second battle of Fallujah in 2004. According to the 2/7 battalion commander, 10,000 troops were needed for the Fallujah operation that created a vacuum in Western al-Anbar province. As units were moved out of cities like Haditha and Hit in order to fight in Fallujah, the insurgents moved into the cities that the Marines had vacated. If more troops were available to fight in Fallujah without

leaving the rest of al-Anbar open to infiltration, the CAP may have been established more easily and operated more effectively. 10 On top of the shortage in troops, the small number of CAPs (only two are known to have been set up) indicates the low priority and lack of importance Marine Corps leadership attached to the CAP program in Iraq. In Vietnam, the CAP was viewed with strategic importance and supported at all levels of the chain of command. In Iraq, the CAP lacked this importance and as a result lacked the guidance of the upper levels of leadership. By no means does the exclusion of the CAP at the strategic level speak to the skills of the upper echelon of leadership at the time but instead illustrates the focus on other priorities. Because of this lack of strategic support, 2^d Battalion Commander, LtCol Phillip Skuta concludes that, “[The CAP] went away when General Mattis went away, when the 1st Marine Division went away.”¹¹ As a result, major changes to the level of implementation of the CAP need to be made. The fact that only two CAPs were established in Iraq shows that the success of this program was not viewed as vital to the main effort of the war. If the CAP was to be redeployed to Iraq, it must be viewed with strategic importance. This would require not just a single divisional implementation, but that every division within the Marine Corps designate CAP units and their locations in country before deploying. This would facilitate communications and turnover with those units already in theater and those units about to deploy. Additionally, these units need to be deployed throughout the country and not simply in one area like al-Anbar. Finally, before the CAP can be redeployed, the

upper levels of leadership need to recognize its importance and include the CAP in the overall battle strategy of the war.

As the number of troops reduces during the future drawdown, it will be impossible to conduct all the necessary missions without the supplementation of another force. In Vietnam, a similar need for troops led LtGen Lewis Walt, Commander, III Marine Amphibious Force to turn to the Vietnamese militia, and thus, the CAP was born. If changes are made to the original Iraqi CAP, then this tactic may prove to be a viable resource for the future.

Notes

1. Obama, Barack, "My Plan for Iraq," *The New York Times*, 14 July 2008, accessed at <<http://www.nytimes.com/2008/07/14/opinion/14obama.html>> on 17 November 2008.
2. CAP is sometimes the abbreviation for the combined action platoon which is a unit operating under the prescriptions of the overall Combined Action Program. For the purpose of this article, the CAP refers to the Combined Action Program.
3. Goodale, Jason (WHAT IS HIS RANK?), a personal interview with the author on 13 November 2008.
4. Pirnie, Bruce R. and Edward O'Connell, *Counterinsurgency in Iraq (2003-2006)*, RAND Corporation Counterinsurgency Study, Volume2, Santa Monica, CA, 2008, p. 65.
5. Goodale interview on 2 October 2008.
6. Ibid.
7. Danner, Matthew, a personal interview with the author on 15 October 2008.
8. Skuta, LtCol Phillip, a personal interview with the author on 2 October 2008.

9. Goodale interview on 2 October 2008.

10. Skuta interview on 2 October 2008.

11. Ibid.