

39th Brigade training 'Sons of Iraq' to secure their own communities ~ Iraqi neighborhood watch group proves to be anything but ordinary

by Maj. Craig Heathscott

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Baghdad, Iraq - His uniform is nothing more than a bright yellow reflective vest that does nothing but reflect the 110-degree heat beating down on him. He doesn't appear much more than 16-years-old; however, he's wielding an old, Russian made AK-47 and he stands between the approaching vehicle and the road behind him. The machine gun is intimidating, but it's the weapon that can't be seen that should be feared equally—pride.

With a different backdrop, he might appear to be a young hunter from a distance. Instead, he's a Soldier of sorts—a member of the 'Sons of Iraq'—and he's dedicated to the protection of his community. He wants the same thing that the Coalition Forces want—peace. And, he's willing to give his life in order to have it here in Radwaniya, a small community in Baghdad of approximately 5,000 Iraqi citizens.

Aside from the monthly stipend of just over one hundred dollars, this showing of pride by this Son of Iraq earns him respect, safety and puts food on the table for his family and community. It's a good deal for all except for any terrorist trying to pass his checkpoint out in the middle of what appears a desolate area.

The Sons of Iraq are a growing force in the Baghdad area. To put it in context of western culture, it's a neighborhood watch group—a watch group on steroids. They carry weapons, and Coalition Forces train them on such things as escalation of force, vehicle and personnel searches, and how to detain a prisoner. And what they lack in skill, they make up in pride and dedication to their mission.

Nonetheless, Coalition Forces seek regular opportunities to provide on-the-spot training in addition to planned day or even week-long classes. At Victory Base Complex in Baghdad, the 39th Brigade Combat Team—Arkansas Army National Guard—is reaping the benefits of an intense focus on SOI training in their AO (Area of Operation).

“Bottom line, we want the Iraqi citizens to own security of their country, and we're doing our part to ensure they have that opportunity,” said Col. Kendall Penn, 39th commander. “It's a win-win situation as they have a sense of pride for what they are doing, and they're able to provide us with valuable information that allows us to be that much more effective in our mission here.

“They know the area, and the people in it. And when strangers come up to a checkpoint, they are very critical of them as to why they are in the area; what is their purpose?” he said. “And, most important, they can provide tips on potential terrorists and IED (Improvised Explosive Devices) threats because they are out their living and breathing it everyday—it's their community, their home. If the SOI are successful you can rest assured that the Coalition is going to be more successful”

As the Base Defense Commander for Victory Base, Penn is responsible for two battalions that have battle space in the perimeter around the base, commonly referred to as 'outside the wire.' One of the battalions—1st Battalion, 153rd Infantry Regiment—is one of Penn's true battalions from Arkansas while the other battalion he provides watch over—1st Battalion, 320th Field Artillery Regiment, of the 101st Airborne—is attached to the 39th Brigade for their rotation in Iraq. Each battalion is intently focused on training the SOI within their AO.

The Soldiers assigned to patrol Makasib and the surrounding area are members of 1st Battalion, 153rd Infantry Regiment based in southern Arkansas. On a recent mission to the community, the five-humvee convoy rolls up to the checkpoint to the delight of the five Soldiers manning the post. Today, they are scheduled to receive some training on weapons posture, rules of engagement as well as personnel search. It will be a quick refresher class for these members of the SOI, but they're eager to learn from Coalition Forces, their friends.

"It's kind of like a friendship," said Staff Sgt. Justin Fisher of Hatfield, Arkansas, who was leading the instruction on weapons posture for 1/153rd Infantry on this day. "It's a very positive working relationship, and we have a mutual respect for one another. The important thing is that they are willing to learn, because they want to help their community."

An exchange of personnel is done at the gate so the Sons of Iraq can focus on learning new skills. Moments later, class begins with Fisher as the lead instructor as the huge mid-day sun fills the sky behind them.

With the aide of an interpreter, this Arkansas Guardsman provides his students with a scenario that involves a car coming at them at a high rate of speed. The obvious question, "what are your actions?"

Sounding off with a noise that was equivalent of the Arabic version of 'bang-bang,' the 'Bowie Brigade' Soldier nods his head in approval and then begins to walk them through the various stages of such a scenario and where the rounds should impact as the car moves closer. It becomes obvious these students have retained a good part of the knowledge Fisher is trying to impart, so after twenty minutes class is over. The next subject is personnel search.

The seriousness of the subject is put aside a moment as laughter breaks out among the class as one of the Iraqis compares the search to a massage and asks to be searched. This lighthearted moment goes a long way in building a very positive relationship with the Coalition Forces in general.

The 45-minute class dismisses and the mobile classroom rolls on to the next checkpoint up the road where the focus turns into hands-on-training as a car is stopped for a vehicle inspection. The driver, who lives in the community, submits his vehicle for the search in order that the SOI can get some training.

Simultaneously across town, another class is being conducted in a more formal environment—a school. The students in this five-day class would be considered freshmen as they are yet to be named members of the SOI. The SOI model is new for this area and has created a lot of interest among the locals in the area. Enrollment has been offered to approximately 110 citizens and as they begin to walk into the courtyard of the school to enroll for class on the last day of training they each carry a weapon of which none appear to be of the same make and model.

As part of the requirement for being a member of the SOI, each member must have their own weapon and ammunition to participate. As a result, the weapons vary in make and model as well as year they were made. But, they all have one thing in common—they provide security.

Instruction is being conducted by an active duty Army unit from Fort Campbell, Kentucky—1st Battalion, 320th Field Artillery Regiment, known as 'Top Gun'. The Sons of Iraq program is new to this area, and the Soldiers are dedicated to providing quality training in the four classrooms setup inside the school.

"Our guys are very professional. . . great [enlisted leaders], and we're basically trying to teach them skills we've learned in our careers," said 2nd Lt. Vincent Barber. "The more we train the Iraqis the more effective they become, and the less hands on we have to be with them. We want them to take over the security of their community."

As they line up to sign in for the day's events, the interpreter checks their name from a list and points them to their assigned classroom. Instruction is a mixture of classroom and hands-on training with each student intently focused on the 'Top Gun' instructor. The interpreter relays the message being taught, and when added with the two Soldiers providing a demonstration of the instructor's words, students seem to grasp the subject matter.

"I want to protect my family and keep it safe from the outside terrorist," claims one middle-aged Iraqi man attending the course.

"You have to remember this is a job for them, but it's also important to note that they are willing to learn," said Lieutenant Barber. "It's a paycheck to them, but you can tell they want the knowledge to do the best job they can. They are a very proud people, and they want very much to protect their community."

"It's interesting, because you'll have a few that will really stand out in the training. A lot of the older men were supervisors in the old Iraq-Iran war; some were members of the Iraqi Army. They know how to run a military outpost and take over security for an area," he said.

With the five-day course now complete, each of the students has officially entered the ranks as members of the Sons of Iraq. They stand at the checkpoint guarding the road

behind them as well as the community they love. They have a basic knowledge of security that allows them to do their job effectively; however, they look forward to the next time they will receive training from the Coalition Forces.

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Photo Cutlines

Weapons posture. Staff Sgt. Justin Fisher, of Hatfield, Arkansas, provides 'weapons posture' training to members of the Sons of Iraq. "It's kind of like a friendship," said Fisher, who was leading the instruction on weapons posture on this day. "It's a very positive working relationship, and we have a mutual respect for one another. The important thing is that they are willing to learn, because they want to help their community." Fisher is a member of 1st Battalion, 153rd Infantry Regiment of the 39th Infantry Brigade Combat Team. (Photo by Maj. Craig Heathscott, 39th Infantry Brigade Combat Team Public Affairs Office)

Weapons posture 2. Staff Sgt. Justin Fisher, of Hatfield, Arkansas, provides 'weapons posture' training to members of the Sons of Iraq. Fisher is a member of 1st Battalion, 153rd Infantry Regiment of the 39th Infantry Brigade Combat Team. "Bottom line, we want the Iraqi citizens to own security of their country, and we're doing our part to ensure they have that opportunity," said Col. Kendall Penn, commander of the 39th. (Photo by Maj. Craig Heathscott, 39th Infantry Brigade Combat Team Public Affairs Office)

Communication. Staff Sgt. Justin Fisher, of Hatfield, Arkansas, speaks with his interpreter while training the 'Sons of Iraq' on vehicle searches. Fisher is a member of 1st Battalion, 153rd Infantry Regiment of the 39th Infantry Brigade Combat Team. (Photo by Maj. Craig Heathscott, 39th Infantry Brigade Combat Team Public Affairs Office)

Personnel search. A Soldier with 1st Battalion, 153rd Infantry Regiment of the 39th Infantry Brigade Combat Team, shows his 'Sons of Iraq' students how to detain an individual during a personnel search. "They know the area, and the people in it. And when strangers come up to a checkpoint, they are very critical of them as to why they are in the area," said Col. Kendall Penn, commander of the 39th. "It's their community, their home. If the [Son's of Iraq] are successful you can rest assured that the Coalition is going to be more successful" (Photo by Maj. Craig Heathscott, 39th Infantry Brigade Combat Team Public Affairs Office)

Working together. Members of the 'Sons of Iraq' participate in hands on training in Makasib with the 39th's 1st Battalion, 153rd Infantry Regiment. The Soldiers are working to train the SOI to more effectively secure their own communities. "It's a win-win situation as they have a sense of pride for what they are doing, and they're able to provide us with valuable information that allows us to be that much more effective in our

mission here," said Col. Kendall Penn, commander of the 39th." (Photo by Maj. Craig Heathscott, 39th Infantry Brigade Combat Team Public Affairs Office)

Vehicle search. During a vehicle search demonstration, a 'Sons of Iraq' student in Radwaniya opens the hood to begin the search. The SOI training was being conducted by 1st battalion, 320th Field Artillery Regiment of the 101st Airborne Division. "I want to protect my family and keep it safe from the outside terrorist," claims one middle-aged Iraqi man attending the course. (Photo by Maj. Craig Heathscott, 39th Infantry Brigade Combat Team Public Affairs Office)

Classroom training. Spc. Jason Stevenson (foreground), 1st Battalion, 320th Field Artillery Regiment, 101st Airborne Division, serves as the demonstrator during personnel search training at a school in the Radwaniya community of Baghdad. "Our guys are very professional. . . great [enlisted leaders], and we're basically trying to teach them skills we've learned in our careers," said 2nd Lt. Vincent Barber. "The more we train the Iraqis the more effective they become, and the less hands on we have to be with them. We want them to take over the security of their community." (Photo by Maj. Craig Heathscott, 39th Infantry Brigade Combat Team Public Affairs Office)

Sharing experience. A Soldier with 1st Battalion, 320th Field Artillery Regiment, 101st Airborne Division provides instruction during a vehicle search class in the Radwaniya community of Baghdad. "They are a very proud people, and they want very much to protect their community," said 2nd Lt. Vincent Barber. (Photo by Maj. Craig Heathscott, 39th Infantry Brigade Combat Team Public Affairs Office)