

NOT-SO-FUNNY-MONEY

Situation: It was March 2007 and I had been working with the 1-75th Iraqi Infantry Battalion on a military transition team (MiTT) for just over six months. Tensions were running high as insurgent violence in Baghdad was at historic levels. GEN Petraeus' troop surge was underway and everyone was working harder to get a handle on the rampant chaos. We had been building a strong rapport with our fellow Iraqi comrades and were beginning to make headway, but signs of fatigue were beginning to set in as the sacrifices each of the Iraqi Soldiers were making was taking a toll on them and their families. They were physically, emotionally, and financially stressed. At this point there was little that we could do to relieve the burdens of training and fighting.

Pay was regular for the Iraqis, however, the word on the street was that local Al Qaeda in Iraq (AQI) insurgent cells were paying more money for planting and executing a single improvised explosive device (IED) attack against the coalition than my Iraqi company commanders were making in a month. This was highly enticing for those that were having to make ends meet at home and were not wholly committed to the cause.

We were always looking for opportunities to build esprit de corps and a strong sense of duty within the battalion. The 1-75th's morale was constantly being broken down with one of the highest casualty rates in the area of operation (AO) and the increasing desertion rates were a key indicator. As we worked to build the team, the Iraqi leadership continued to ask for more supplies, ammunition, and money, claiming that their own chain of command was neither responsive nor cooperating with them. We were explicitly trained that to support the Iraqis through our own supply channels was not acceptable and would lead to major problems down the road. Setting an unacceptable precedent of supporting the Iraqis out of our own supply channels would be counterproductive to developing them and could create fragile working relationships if subsequent MiTT teams do not carry the same support relationships forward. So I forced the leaders to work within their command and supply channels. After all, we were there to teach and enable their success.

At the end of the month, my brigade commander, COL David, approached me and inquired about the Iraqi supply and pay issues. He explained that their brigade commander had complained to him about their problems and vowed to set things straight – this issue needed to be assuaged somehow. A few days later, my brigade commander inquired of the progress I was making on using my small rewards money. Small rewards money were funds established by regulation expressly for the purpose of supplying cash rewards to encourage local Iraqis to divulge critical information that could either lead to the capture of insurgents or prevent attacks. He had increasingly been scrutinizing our team's small rewards funds because we were trailing the rest of the battalion in their use. At this point we were the only MiTT in his battalion that had yet to zero out the balance for the quarter. He stated that he had examined our team's financial report and that we had a significant balance remaining for the quarter.

COL David proceeded to pull me outside next to the cement T-barrier out of earshot from the rest of the team. He explained that we've made tremendous progress with the Iraqis and that we need to be compassionate to the great sacrifices that they are making for their country – we need to keep their heads in the fight. He further concluded that they are risking a great deal in working with us and against their own people, as some may view it. Its tough business and we need to be empathetic. He presented the option of using the remaining funds of the rewards account along with this month's small rewards money to pay the Iraqi Soldiers as a "reward" for their efforts. He instantly recognized the concern written on my face and suggested that I think about it and get back with him. He recommended that we keep this "close" to the greatest extent possible. He parted with the observation that he was convinced that this will ultimately serve to build a better bond between our Iraqi comrades and us, and prompted me to always keep that in perspective. He emphasized that many of our Iraqi brothers have to decide each day with whom their loyalty will lay, and we need to prove to them that we are the winning team by providing good reason to stand with us. "Eric, give me a call tomorrow and let me know that we can proceed, and thanks for the great work you and your team are doing," he closed.