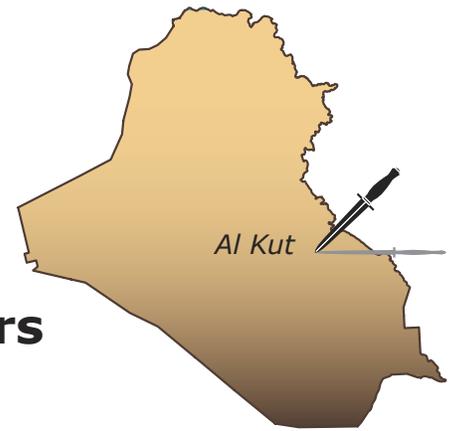


ODA 542:

Working with the Free Iraqi Fighters



by A. Dwayne Aaron and Cherilyn A. Walley

The Defense Department championed the FIF, and saw them as a transitional force to be used in lieu of the police. The State Department, on the other hand, saw them as nothing more than the military arm of the Iraqi National Congress.

THE constant roar of aircraft taking off and landing at Kuwait's Ali Al-Salem Air Base was a constant reminder to Captain (CPT) Mike King (pseudonym) that he and his team were on the sidelines of the big show. Second Battalion, 5th Special Forces Group (SFG) was sending teams on missions throughout southern Iraq, but CPT King and Operational Detachment Alpha (ODA) 542 had been left behind. They had been selected to serve as an Area Support Team (AST) and assist with the myriad details and precise coordination required by such a large-scale operation. King and the others took scant comfort in knowing that they were performing duties critical to the battalion's success. Between AST duties, the men of ODA 542 spent whatever time they could keeping their individual and team skills sharp for the day they, too, would be sent on a mission. Finally, on 10 April 2003, ODA 542 moved by MC-130 to Tallil Air Base, where they were detailed to train and work with members of the Free Iraqi Fighters (FIF).

In early April, Ahmed Chalabi, Chairman of the Iraqi National Congress (INC) Executive Council, and more than six hundred Iraqi volunteers had flown into An Nasiriyah to assist with the overthrow of the Saddam regime. Mostly Iraqi expatriates who fled the Saddam regime over the past decade, the FIF volunteers brought varying levels of military experience. The U.S. Defense Department championed

Chalabi and the FIF, and saw them as a transitional force to be used in lieu of the police. The State Department, on the other hand, saw the FIF as nothing more than the military arm of the INC. Whatever the disagreements in Washington DC, the FIF was on the ground and Central Command (CENTCOM) had to find a job for it to do.¹

The original plan was for ODA 542 to train and employ a platoon-sized element of FIF. However, within the first week, one hundred men arrived for training. Some of the local recruits were rumored to be Fedayeen, which led ODA 542 to take those individuals into custody and turn them over to the proper authorities for questioning. Once possible infiltrators were culled, the team set about organizing the trainees. The FIF reported en masse, with no apparent internal leadership organization. Master Sergeant (MSG) Theodore Ruggins (pseudonym), Staff Sergeant (SSG) Franco Findley (pseudonym), and SSG Steve Means acted as primary trainers, and organized the FIF into three platoons.² The SF trainers used basic small unit tactics drills and patrolling exercises to identify those FIF with natural leadership ability; these soldiers were then appointed as squad and platoon leaders. In the course of teaching the volunteers basic weapons proficiency, the team identified the best marksmen and designated them as machine gunners.³

As the tactical organization and assessment of the FIF's skills continued, ODA

542 also addressed such administrative and supply issues as identification documents, pay, food, and ammunition. Using a digital camera, the team made each FIF volunteer a photo identification card printed with an English transcription of the soldier's name. The paymaster arrived on 14 April to pay the troops—each volunteer receiving an impressive \$150 per month. Until the SF team could contract for local food, members of ODA 542 had to open the provided Meals Ready to Eat (MREs) and remove the culturally inappropriate items before distributing them to the FIF soldiers.⁴ The shortage of AK-47 ammunition was finally solved when team members ferreted out a local source.⁵

As the training progressed, both the SF and the FIF soldiers were restless and eager to get into the fight. On 16 April they were finally ordered to report to the Marine Task Force (TF) Tarawa in Al Kut, where the FIF would receive its first test by fire. After the Ba'ath party leaders had fled Al Kut, Sheik Said Ahmed, an Iranian sympathizer, claimed the mayoral position and began working to restore civil services. While members of ODA 542 conducted an assessment of Al Kut, they gathered some interesting information on Said Ahmed from conversations with local residents. Evidently, the Iranian government was funding the mayor, and he was using Iranian money to purchase food and other items for exclusive distribution to the Shia faithful. Said Ahmad was also reported to have stolen food from civic storage facilities and similarly distributed it under his name. The mayor was also responsible for posting anti-American and pro-Iranian posters throughout the city, and hiring people to conduct weekly protests at the Marine headquarters. The team passed all such intelligence on to Colonel (Col.) Ron Johnson, deputy commander of TF Tarawa, as well as the fact that Said Ahmed spent his off hours at the former Saddam Hospital.⁶ Col. Johnson acted on the information and gave Said Ahmed an ultimatum: stop the anti-American propaganda or get out of Al Kut.⁷

On the 25 April, Said Ahmed decided to heed the Marines' demands and leave town—but not without a fight. That afternoon, heavy firing broke out in Al Kut, warning the members of ODA 542 to either return to their safe house (which was located near the hospital), or hunker down with the Marines at Tarawa House. All afternoon and into the evening gunfire increased and spread, targeting task force compounds and drawing closer to the team's safe house and the hospital. In response, CPT King scrambled a forty-man FIF platoon and twelve American troops and rushed to secure the hospital. The team rolled into the hospital not a minute too soon, and FIF Colonel Ali Hasan and MSG Rug-gins hastily positioned the FIF soldiers in defensive perimeter. Within five minutes of their arrival, the AK-47 and machine gun fire directed at the hospital intensified. As fire came from all sides, it seemed that the insurgents were probing the perimeter to locate a weak spot; the perimeter held. As the battle continued into the night, the electricity went out. To keep the enemy at bay, SSG Cook called on a nearby Marine mortar unit to fire illumination rounds for the FIF.⁸ Meanwhile CPT King and the rest of the Americans cleared and secured the hospital itself.⁹ The firing continued sporadically for about three hours, then tapered off. Incoming casualties replaced rounds, and wounded insurgents eventually seemed to outnumber attackers.¹⁰

Back at the safe house, Chief Warrant Officer 2 Shoemaker and SSG Bob Flood shored up defenses with reinforcements from a nearby Marine unit and the remaining team members. At the same time the hospital came under attack, the safe house began receiving

Few of the FIF volunteers had previous military training or experience. 5th Special Forces Group ODA 542 organized the men into platoons and taught them the basics of soldiering.





By the time the FIF had been organized and trained, they were ready and anxious to join the fight against Saddam Hussein and others who wanted the new Iraq to fail.

automatic weapons fire from several directions. The fire did not appear to be directed at anything in particular and while the buildings received several hits, no team member was injured. The team members returned fire, but could not ascertain effectiveness. Ultimately, the attack ceased and the insurgents departed Al Kut.

The firefight at the hospital was the turning point for ODA 542 and the FIF in Al Kut.¹¹ Much to the delight of both the doctors and the patients, CPT King left a FIF security force in place to discourage looters. Over the next few days, word spread of the protection being provided and the number of people seeking medical care increased dramatically. Word of the role the FIF played in saving the hospital also spread throughout Al Kut, and soon other facilities and businesses in town asked for FIF security details. CPT King developed a list of key facilities and locations for the FIF to secure: hospitals, banks, the water treatment plant, and the propane filling station.¹²

With Said Ahmed and the Iranian influence gone, the anti-American protestors also disappeared. Once common, random firing was now rarely heard. During its first night on security detail, the FIF added to its reputation by thwarting two attempted robberies. The security presence encouraged people who feared for their safety to come out in public and return to their normal pursuits. CPT King said the transition was remarkable: "Almost overnight, it went from a ghost town to Times Square."¹³

Mission complete, on the morning of 15 May, ODA 542 and the FIF returned to Tallil Air Base; the team to take another assignment, and the FIF to demobilize. While a good idea, the FIF had outlived its usefulness, and resources needed to be allocated elsewhere. Five extra dollars were added to the volunteers' pay in order to facilitate their journeys home, and each was given a certificate of service. Allegations of corruption had certainly hastened their demobi-

lization, but they had also accomplished some good in Al Kut, and could be proud of their service.

As for the men of ODA 542, on 17 May, they loaded their vehicles one last time in Iraq, and headed south for the return journey to Ali Al-Salem Air Base in Kuwait. As the dust swirled behind their convoy and Al Kut disappeared in their rearview mirrors, the team felt both a sense of satisfaction and regret. They had helped thwart Iranian efforts to influence postwar politics in Al Kut, and had worked to restore a sense of security and normalcy for the general population. Those were accomplishments they could be proud of. Working with the Free Iraqi Fighters, however, brought mixed emotions. The training and supervision of the FIF had been both rewarding and frustrating, as the team struggled to turn a motley group of recruits with diverse motivations into a professional fighting force. ODA 542 could not complain too much, though—it had finally gotten its mission. 📌

Endnotes

- 1 "The Little Man that would . . .," SMH.COM.AU, 18 April 2003, www.smh.com.au/articles/2003/04/17/1050172705937.html.
- 2 Staff Sergeant Steve Means (pseudonym), ODA 542, B Company, 2nd Battalion, 5th Special Forces Group, interview by Lieutenant Colonel Dennis P. Mroczkowski, 25 May 2003, Ali al-Salem Air Base, Kuwait, digital copy, USASOC History Office Classified Files, Fort Bragg, NC.
- 3 Staff Sergeant James Cook (pseudonym), ODA 542, B Company, 2nd Battalion, 5th Special Forces Group, interview by Lieutenant Colonel Dennis P. Mroczkowski, 24 May 2003, Ali al-Salem Air Base, Kuwait, digital copy, USASOC History Office Classified Files, Fort Bragg, NC.
- 4 Master Sergeant Theodore Ruggins (pseudonym), ODA 542, B Company, 2nd Battalion, 5th Special Forces Group, interview by Lieutenant Colonel Dennis P. Mroczkowski, 24 May 2003, Ali al-Salem Air Base, Kuwait, digital copy, USASOC History Office Classified Files, Fort Bragg, NC.
- 5 Captain Mike King (pseudonym), ODA 542, B Company, 2nd Battalion, 5th Special Forces Group, interview by Lieutenant Colonel Dennis P. Mroczkowski, 24 May 2003, Ali al-Salem Air Base, Kuwait, digital copy, USASOC History Office Classified Files, Fort Bragg, NC.
- 6 Chief Warrant Officer 2 Billy Shoemaker (pseudonym), ODA 542, B Company, 2nd Battalion, 5th Special Forces Group, interview by Lieutenant Colonel Dennis P. Mroczkowski, 24 May 2003, Ali al-Salem Air Base, Kuwait, digital copy, USASOC History Office Classified Files, Fort Bragg, NC.
- 7 King interview.
- 8 Cook interview.
- 9 King interview.
- 10 Staff Sergeant Franco Findley (pseudonym), ODA 542, B Company, 2nd Battalion, 5th Special Forces Group, interview by Lieutenant Colonel Dennis P. Mroczkowski, 25 May 2003, Ali al-Salem Air Base, Kuwait, digital copy, USASOC History Office Classified Files, Fort Bragg, NC.
- 11 Shoemaker interview.
- 12 King interview.