From Aggieland to Iraq

Taking Leadership Lessons Into The Real World

By Krista Smith ’09

It started with an e-mail—a quickly typed message from the battalion commander, a note that reached the inbox of Capt. Josh Rowan ’02 during a cool, clear night in Iraq during August 2007. Rowan, who served as a platoon leader during the early days of his tour of duty, had recently been promoted to a staff position as effects coordinator. And this e-mail, this message, would mark the beginning of a project that would not only define the rest of Rowan’s tour but also radically alter the security of a war-torn country.

Rowan, a field artillery officer with the 82nd Airborne Division, had his first taste of deployment when his unit was sent to New Orleans after Hurricane Katrina. The disaster relief efforts kept the division busy, but the government had another plan for the outfit. The United States was having a difficult time in Iraq; mistakes were made, unforeseen circumstances had appeared and morale was down. A military strategy change was in order, and President George W. Bush announced just that in January 2007. Operation Together Forward, or what commonly became known as the troop surge, would begin as soon as possible. The 82nd Airborne was the first unit to go—they shipped out in February.

Rowan was stationed in Baghdad province, in the Adhamiyah Security District. The violence in the province caused the Iraqi people to live in fear, he said. The markets were empty, the citizens shrank away from U.S. soldiers, city governments weren’t meeting, students weren’t attending school. Rowan’s unit was at a loss—how could they elevate the Iraqi’s quality of life? The answer...
came from Marines out west in Anbar province.

“Local Iraqis were being overrun by Sunni extremists in that area,” Rowan explained. “The other Sunnis approached the military folks and said, ‘Hey, we want to establish a local security force to protect us from terrorists and extremists out here.’ That’s when the Anbar Awakening was formed.”

Word of the program and its eventual success spread across the country. Iraqis began approaching U.S. soldiers stationed in their areas, asking for a similar program in their respective areas. An army unit near Abu Ghraib began the second program before Rowan’s battalion commander, Lt. Col. Wilson A. Shoffner, was approached by a group from Baghdad province. The program would have to work differently; Baghdad is home to a mix of Sunni and Shia people, while the earlier programs catered only to Sunnis. Shoffner knew such a program would benefit the area, and he knew just the man who could make it successful, a man who had the education and experience to handle this type of project: Rowan, an Aggie who had graduated with a degree in agricultural and leadership development, or ALED.

**A Leadership Laboratory**

The ALED degree began in 1991, and its students learn theories of leadership, how to deal with groups, conflict management and how to develop and evaluate leadership programs.

Dr. Christine Townsend, a professor in the Department of Agricultural Leadership, Education and Communications, said the major operates on the belief that Texas A&M is a leadership laboratory.

“We have so many student organizations here where students can experience leadership,” Townsend said. “Texas A&M gives you that safety net, where if you fail, you have something to catch you.”

The professors within the department are pragmatic with their teachings, emphasizing the theory of leadership, but Townsend said the success of ALED graduates wouldn’t be possible if students didn’t blend what they were taught in the classroom with their campus involvement.

ALED graduates are people-oriented individuals who go on to work in communications, politics, extension work and youth development programs. But Rowan’s situation was unique, Townsend said, because his success developed out of a crisis situation. When Rowan sent Townsend an e-mail about his involvement with the Sons of Iraq, she knew his experience at the Texas A&M leadership laboratory had paid off.

“I was teaching a course on change when Josh wrote and sent me a news article about the program,” she said. “As a professor, I jumped up and down with joy and pride, but then turned around and took it right into the classroom and said, ‘Here’s a change process and how it works.’”

Leadership and heritage go hand in hand with the tradition at A&M, and it is showing current students what former students have accomplished in the real world that fosters their learning, Townsend said.

“They (current students) get more excited about what former students are doing out in their jobs,” she said. “So we take these examples and put them in our classroom, in our lectures, in our notes.”

In fact, it was a lesson about Abraham Maslow’s hierarchy of needs from Townsend’s class that Rowan remembered before he began organizing the Sons of Iraq program.

“What Maslow said was people are going to come from a lot of different places in life, but before they can move up, they have to have security—that’s the bottom of the hierarchy,” Rowan explained. “The population was ready to take this on. The people had to be at a turning
point, they had to be ready to say ‘We renounce violence’ and say ‘We renounce these people living among us.’ They were ready.”

Birth Of The Sons Of Iraq

After receiving Shoffner’s e-mail, Rowan got right to work, contacting the other two local security programs.

“I just asked what worked, what didn’t work, what would you do different,” he said. “I didn’t want to reinvent the wheel; I needed to take their programs and adapt it to our area. Every program had to be different. That was my challenge.”

The idea was bold: take just the right mix of local Iraqis, give them training and supervision, collect data on the program, put them on the streets and eventually transition them into police officer roles.

Rowan started by contacting Iraqis who were trusted agents, local leaders who had cooperated with the unit before. Eventually, eight men—sheiks, business leaders, former military officers—were selected and assigned responsibilities for certain aspects of the overall program. In turn, the eight men talked to their communities, seeking men who were prepared to help secure their province.

Next, Rowan organized a sort of career day. Interested men showed up and were cleared in a terrorist database before being subjected to retinal and fingerprint scans, as well as having a digital photograph taken. From this new database, Rowan, his fellow soldiers and the eight Iraqi leaders reviewed each applicant before voting on each individual. Once a consensus was reached on which men to accept into the program, the training began.

“We took all the guys we had agreed on and put them through a three-day training program that we had developed,” Rowan said. “They were trained in marksmanship, rule of law, how to search a vehicle, just a variety of different subjects.”

The men received a certificate and an ID card to verify their completion of training, and although the U.S. military couldn’t give the men weapons, they were authorized to have them when on patrol. Each man would earn $300 a month for his duty, a decent wage, but one that was intentionally designed to be less than the monthly salary of an Iraqi police officer.

But this program was not going to be a militia—the goal was to make these security guards transition into police, supported entirely by Iraq and not by the United States. To ensure this, Rowan created a series of checkpoints throughout the city. Each checkpoint was staffed with guards 24 hours a day, and Rowan designed a hierarchal chain of authority within each checkpoint, something he had learned from his post as president of the Memorial Student Center.

Three months, 1,100 trained guards and $3 million dollars later, the first Sons of Iraq members hit the streets, patrolling a city with a population of more than 1 million. And Iraqi life, Rowan said, has improved significantly. The program’s statistics show that violence is down more than 50 percent in the province, a statistic that Rowan also attributes to the troop surge and ceasefire agreement from Muqtada al-Sadr. The Sons of Iraq have prevented IEDs, detained fugitives and stopped kidnappings.

But what’s even better—the markets are thriving. Housing prices are up. The people are smiling, the children waving and asking U.S. soldiers for candy.

As more military units began adopting the program after Rowan’s success, the U.S. military standardized the programs into one project, making the Sons of Iraq a national entity. But most important, Rowan said, Sons of Iraq members are making the jump to becoming Iraqi police. To date, about 60 percent of those originally tapped in Rowan’s program have made the transition.

Rowan returned home to civilian life in June, but he follows the progress of the Sons of Iraq as much as he can given the sensitive security issues, hoping that others can learn

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