Learning To Fly: How The US Military Can Fix The Problems Plaguing Aviation Advising Missions

Description

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In 2017, Afghan Mi-17 helicopters flown by crews from the elite Afghan 777 Special Mission Wing saved the day. Shortly after notification of an ISIS-Khorasan attack on a hospital in Kabul, they braved rifle and machine-gun fire to deposit Afghan special police on the rooftop and ground. This was a case of Afghan crews skillfully flying Afghan aircraft into dangerâ??a testament to the effort of an enduring aviation capacity-building effort by the international community. These helicopter crews built their skills over five years of continuous training alongside a special operations advisory group (SOAG), a coalition element dedicated to teaching advanced aviation skills. And they have done so despite serious shortfalls within the US aviation advisory system.

One of the toughest security force assistance challenges the US military faces in Iraq and Afghanistan is how to help both countries use airpower in their fights against insurgent elements. Airpower can rapidly move personnel and supplies across long distances or to otherwise inaccessible terrain, gather imagery and signals intelligence, provide close air support and firepower to units in distress, and provide life-saving medical evacuation for casualties. It offers an advantage for the Afghan and Iraqi militaries in their fights against insurgents.

In 2017, I assumed command of one of the three special operations advisor teams subordinate to the SOAG. We advised the Special Mission Wing, Afghanistanâ??s only special operations aviation unit. I thought I was up to the task. In actuality, neither my skills as a pilot nor my experience as a foreign area officer prepared me for this mission. And I am not alone. Extensive interviews I recently conducted with US Air Force and Army officers who commanded aviation advisor organizations in Afghanistan and Iraq between 2015 and 2020 reveal that the most challenging issues we face are often internal.

The US military undermines its own aviation advisory missions in three ways. First, it cobbles together teams of ill-prepared and poorly organized aviation advisors. Second, it provides insufficient oversight of defense contractors supporting the aviation security force assistance mission in-country. Finally,

aviation advisor commanders, the people best positioned to mitigate these flaws, are not equipped to do so. Success in future aviation advisor missions requires understanding and addressing these challenges.

Aviation Advisors: A Pickup Game

Most advisor units, such as US Army Special Forces and security force assistance brigades, work and train together before deployment. Like a professional sports team, they arrive in-country as a practiced unit following a well-rehearsed playbook. Conversely, we found ourselves in Afghanistan with groups of aviation advisors that were continuously shifting in size and composition as teammates rotated in and out on varying schedules.

To advise and assist the operations of two Afghan Mi-17 helicopter assault squadrons and a PC-12 aerial reconnaissance squadron, in addition to the Special Mission Wingâ??s training, my team usually had between ten and twelve advisors. We never had a full complement of authorized personnel, nor did we ever have the right mix of advisors. Services sought volunteers and randomly selected aviators if no one volunteered. Without having worked together before and without a script for how to advise the Afghans, we were a Saturday afternoon pickup team struggling against the effects of a system of individual replacements, varying levels of advisor aptitude, and the challenges of building a team from across every American service and several nations.

WIAS Woes

The SOAG required nearly one hundred aviation advisors, but the militaryâ??s system to fill these slots is ineffective. Since at least 2016, despite vigorous recruiting efforts by commanders, the actual number of advisors hovered around fifty-five. â??If we had just sat back and waited, we would have ended the year with twenty-three advisors,â?• reports Shane Finison, the SOAG commander from 2019 to 2020. Shane estimates that he spent 30 percent of his time advertising the Armyâ??s positions to find volunteers and talking to their unit commanders. â??A lot of times I felt like a college football coach, recruiting and talking about what I could offer and get their commander to buy off because if they send someone, they donâ??t get a backfill. At the end of the day, filling these positions is not a priority for the services.â?•

For example, I routinely lacked critical advisor personnel such as US Army flight engineers, mechanics trained to fly on helicopters. While our team was supposed to have several flight engineers, failures in the Armyâ??s deployment process, the Worldwide Individual Augmentation System (WIAS), meant we usually had one and at times none. Why did the WIAS fail to provide the critical advisors needed?

Chad Chasteen, the SOAG commander from 2016 to 2017, argues the Army can get away with not filling its WIAS deployment requirements because â??itâ??s really easy for Army commanders to say no. The units are getting WIAS taskers for Saudi, Kuwait, and they look at the SOAG as just another requirement that is going to lower their readiness rates. Itâ??s called a WIAS tasking, but really, itâ??s more like a WIAS asking system. Also, itâ??s not easy for people to volunteer because youâ??re basically telling your chain-of-command that youâ??d rather deploy than do your own unitâ??s mission.â?•

Without flight engineers, we could not protect ourselves on helicopter missions with the Afghans. To fly with the Afghan Mi-17 crews, I needed one pilot-advisor in the cockpit with access to the flight controls in case of an emergency and a second advisor in the rear to monitor the cargo and passengers in case of an insider attack. To meet mission requirements, we improvised, training officers as helicopter door gunners and imagery analysts as airborne camera operators. Unfortunately, these creative solutions required significant investment of our advisor teamâ??s time and attention, at the expense of our Afghan partners. They also carried a substantial amount of risk. Our approach was amateurish, especially compared to our ground advisor counterparts.

Aviation advisor manning was not only an Army problem. The Air Force struggled to send the right people at the right time, forcing commanders to change their plans. â??We fought this regularly,â?• according to Jim Howard, the 370th Air Expeditionary Advisor Group (AEAG) commander in Iraq from 2017 to 2018. â??If you donâ??t get the guy youâ??re supposed to have on the manning document, then it changes the way you do your mission entirely. We dealt with that frequently on the operations and officer side.â?•

Eduardo Defendini, the 370th AEAG commander in 2018 to 2019, laments the lengthy delay between requests for additional advisor expertise and the time it took to find and deploy people: â??By the time force management sent us what we requested, they were 12-18 months late to the fight. For example, I needed airfield management, firefighters, and civil engineers to build those capabilities in the Iraqi Air Force, but I never saw them. They might be showing up now or maybe next summer.â?•

In another case, Sean Cosden, the 370th AEAG commander in 2019â??2020, recalls a bewildered space officer assigned to him stating, â??I donâ??t know what Iâ??m doing here. You know the Iraqis donâ??t have a space program. Who am I supposed to be advising?â?• There were several instances of clear advisor mismatch like this, according to Sean.

Not only did the aviation advisor group in Iraq consist of airmen pulled from across the Air Force, but twice a year, an almost entirely synchronized deployment cycle drained the organization of knowledge gained over the previous period. â??Most of the deployments were aligned, and so 85 percent of the

group swapped out at the same time,â?• according to Sean. â??It was a brand-new team. It would take them up to a month to rebuild rapport with the Iraqis. Just staggering some of those deployments could help with experience levels and could help bring along some of those folks who are struggling against the culture.â?•

Advisor Aptitude

Sean identified a weakness observed by every other commander as wellâ??advisor inexperience. Advisors who became influential with the Afghan and Iraqi airmen were open-minded and mentally flexible. They could manage the stress of cognitive dissonance that the mission entailed. However, almost all former commanders recall having to send home advisors who were overwhelmed with the stress.

Why did some aviation advisors thrive where others struggled? According to most former commanders, an advisorâ??s personality, not rank or technical skill, was the primary determinant of an individualâ??s success. â??Itâ??s about the person,â?• says Jim Howard. â??Are you a patient person, or are you going to be a jackass and go off the top rope straight away? We had those guys, and boy, they were a challenge to work with and rein back in.â?•

Similarly, Marcus Jackson, the commander of the 441st Air Expeditionary Advisor Squadron (AEAS) from 2018 to 2019 in Kandahar, believes good advisors often had personalities in tension with the usual attributes needed for promotion. â??The military doesnâ??t train advisors. It trains do-ers who get promoted by their ability to do. I found that the guys who are the best air advisors are willing to experiment, try different things, and see what happens.â?•

The military services, however, do not screen for personality traits when selecting aviation advisors. Instead, they send a requirement into the personnel system, like a steel ball into a Japanese *pachinko* machine, to bounce down the organizational hierarchy until it lands on an individual that a unit can spare. While most commanders thought well of the Army and Air Forceâ??s two-week advisor training, all agreed that no course can rewire the mindset of an adult with a decade or more in the military. The courses cannot compensate for the weakness of a system that selects advisors based on rank and job qualification alone.

Combined-Joint Challenges

The pickup game approach to building an aviation advisor organization often includes a kludging of advisors from multiple services and coalition partners. Like the Special Mission Wing advisory effort, the aviation advisor mission to the Afghan Air Force included Air Force, Army, and Navy advisors from

the United States, and coalition advisors, at every organization level. The Iraqi aviation advisory mission also included coalition advisors, and although it only had US Air Force advisors since 2014, every former commander expressed the need for help from the US Army. What drove these practices in aviation advising, however, was not innovative strategy but necessity. The result was ineffective teams that faced many practical difficulties working together, regardless of individual advisor talent.

None of the US military services, alone or together, possess all the aviation capabilities needed to do aviation advising comprehensively in support of a counterinsurgency mission. Aircraft mostly absent from the US militaryâ??s inventory, such as the Mi-17, Mi-35, L-159, C-208, T-50, and C-27, were all employed by either the Iraqi or Afghan air forces, or both. Coalition forces often have the expertise American advisors lack and can sometimes make progress where American advisors struggle.

Each nation and service brings unique capabilitiesâ??and baggage. Sean Cosden estimates that â??50 percent of the Iraqi generals were happy to see us and work with us, 30 percent were indifferent, and 20 percent were resistant because we were Americans.â?• The fact that advisors came from a country that had fought against Iraq multiple times rankled some senior Iraqi leaders. However, Cosdenâ??s Italian advisors could gain access and influence. â??We found the Italians were effective there. Those resistant generals didnâ??t want to deal with the US guys, but theyâ??d talk to the Italians. There were things that they could get done that we couldnâ??t because we were Americans.â?•

However, interflying US and coalition crews caused friction. Issues ranged from amusing differences in cockpit terminology like â??We say port and starboard while you say left and rightâ?• to more severe problems such as â??I donâ??t speak Englishâ?• or â??I donâ??t recognize your authority.â?•

Starting in 2017, Polish Mi-17 pilots began arriving at the SOAG to be aviation advisors, with replacements coming every six months. There was no question that their expertise on the Mi-17 far exceeded everyone elseâ??s except, perhaps, the Afghansâ??. However, the Polish pilotsâ?? English varied widely, with profound implications. I could not accept the risk of putting a Polish advisor and an Afghan, both with marginal English skills, in the cockpit of a roaring helicopter to fly at night and in combat. Emergencies or enemy fires require a high level of precise spoken communication. Several Polish pilots who could not contribute to the mission due to language barriers went home early, much to everyoneâ??s chagrin.

Problems can arise when flying US aircrew from different services together, too. During training and exchanges, such as US Navy pilots instructing in a T-6 trainer while assigned to an Air Force pilot training base, or Air Force pilots flying Marine MV-22 helicopters, services develop interfly agreements well in advance. Because these crews operate aircraft worth tens of millions of dollars, they have to

understand the legal and administrative rules clearly. Flying an aircraft without proper authorization and following the wrong regulations are two of the quickest ways to lose oneâ??s flight wings, and career, permanently.

However, when the military services do not agree in advance, ambiguity results. In the case of the 441st AEAS in Kandahar, the services had not properly established command relationships for the Army UH-60 crewmembers that arrived in 2017. Despite improper coordination, Air Force leadership expected Army pilots to fly intermixed with Afghan, Air Force, Navy, and coalition crews.

But some Army pilots disagreed, and not without reason. Marcus Jackson explains, â??There was no institutional look from the Army at how air advising was going to work.â?• Marcus got lucky. â??My guys understood that there were some significant issues with the way things were done, but without crossing certain lines, they were very willing to work with the Air Force regulations and Afghan regulations.â?• But, he continues, â??the next group that came after I left had some serious frictions with the Air Force leadership. The problem was that the program wasnâ??t built well; it was built quickly. It should have gotten sorted out before the first Army guy got on the rotator.â?• Dissension and discord came to a head in 2019. Ultimately, senior leaders removed both the advisor squadron and group commanders.

There are no US military organizations that can individually take on a rebuilding mission of the scope and scale of the Afghan or Iraqi air force. Pickup aviation advising is here to stay. Future commanders can expect their organizations to consist of inexperienced aviation advisors drawn from across the US military and coalition partners. Commanders must determine how to employ their hastily assembled teams to get the next partner nationâ??s military up in the air to fight the future Taliban or ISIS.

Air Advisors Rely on Defense Contractors Without Oversight

Throughout my tour at the Special Mission Wing in Afghanistan and travels to Bagram, Kabul, Mazar-e-Sharif, and Kandahar, I saw civilian defense contractors from scores of firms. Military personnel seemed few and far between. Contractors did it all: teaching English, translating, maintaining aircraft, providing security, driving fuel trucks, and instructing. In my best estimation, contractors completed between 70 and 90 percent of the aviation security force assistance mission. While I expected to see many support jobs done by contractors, I did not expect most of our aviation advisory mission contracted out as well.

Contractors will remain critical to the air advising mission as they bring crucial capability at low cost and with a low profile. While military advisors carry the strength and symbolic power of the uniform, they are transient and draw the attention of local fighters. In contrast, defense contractors leverage

three essential strengths for a successful aviation advisor mission: expertise, endurance, and low visibility.

One would struggle to find more than a handful of US military personnel who have extensive knowledge about the operation and maintenance of these uncommon aircraft who could also commit more than six to twelve months to the job. That talent is still rare in the civilian world, but it exists. For the right price, it can work for long periods.

â??Thereâ??s no way the Army or the Air Force would have the stomach to invest the number of man-years, man-decades, that those contractors did,â?• according to Mark Kappelmann, the SOAG commander from 2017 to 2018. â??Some people think that soldiers are less expensive because you have to pay contractors $120,000 per year. But, you can drop the contractor tomorrow if the contract ends. You canâ??t do that with the soldiers or airmen. Youâ??re vested. You own their families. You had to invest millions to train them up to that point.â?•

Defense contractors do not attract the same attention as military personnel and can frequently operate without the same level of security. â??Contractors have a lot more freedom of action,â?• remarks Brad Bridges, the commander of the 370th AEAG from 2015 to 2016. In fact, collared shirts and khaki pants conceal the contractors to a degree. â??Their ability to accept a reasonable risk and just fly in and gain access without a larger force protection component made them an easier tool because that environment was more permissible to them.â?•

I lacked, however, any comprehension of how the Department of Defense procures training, support, and equipment for other countries through defense contracting. I did not understand the legal authorities that govern those contracting activities, nor did I know how to monitor contractor performance, read a performance work statement, or clarify contract disagreements. The other aviation advisor commanders were just as unprepared.

â??Frankly, it took me four to six months to feel like I had a good understanding of how everything was working and the organization chart and lines of authority, funding streams, etc. which were very convoluted,â?• says Manny Fiterre, the 738th Air Expeditionary Advisor Group commander in Afghanistan from 2017 to 2018, summing up how most felt regarding defense contractors. â??Many advisor commanders come from an operational background, so theyâ??ll know how to fly, they may even know how to maintain, but the contracting piece will be a little more distant and not part of their thought process. I certainly would have benefited from more training on how to do that properly.â?•

This deficit of understanding hurts mission effectiveness and efficiency. Ruminating about the defense contractors, Chad Chasteen remarks, â??Looking back, I think there could have been more oversight.

They donâ??t teach us how to monitor the contractors in professional military education. You learn it as you go. I realized that I had so many blind spots and needed to move faster. There are ethics, rules, ways to maximize the effectiveness of the American dollar, but I donâ??t think we, as a government, do the best job with oversight.â?•

Commanders must understand that neither the corporations nor the individual defense contractors are under the military organizationâ??s direct command. Inside the Department of Defense, a constellation of acquisition and security cooperation organizations purchase equipment and services on behalf of foreign nations. The defense contractors work for the corporation under contract with those government agencies.

This disunity of command creates tensions. For example, the defense contractor may be responsible for ensuring the partner nationâ??s aircraft can fly. At the same time, aviation advisors may want to give the partner airmen more responsibility for maintenance. Those efforts to build independence will likely require corrections and cause delays to aircraft repairs and inspections. In turn, those delays lower the availability of aircraft for operations and training, thereby hurting contract performance.

To harmonize these efforts, commanders need to build relationships with the partner nationâ??s military leadership, the defense contractor site leads, and security cooperation managers located in the country. They will have to do the same with the relevant acquisition program managers, contracting officers, and oversight personnel back in the United States. As representatives of the US government and certainly as senior US military officers, commanders need to understand their responsibility to monitor defense contractors on their airfield even if they do not have a direct oversight role. This balancing act requires significant coordination, communication, and handholding.

In fact, lax oversight is often the root cause of contract issues. A review of the audits and investigations of the Special Inspector General for Afghanistan (SIGAR) and the Special Inspector General for Iraq demonstrate numerous instances of fraud, shoddy work, and other problems with contract performance. For example, in April 2020, SIGAR reported that over a five-year period, it had made 219 corrective recommendations to the Department of Defense to increase accountability and improve contractor oversight. The number implemented was less than half.

Considering the billions of dollars in aviation security force assistance contracts that floated around in Iraq and Afghanistan, aviation advisor commanders will continue to face these challenges. Only government oversight personnel can address contractor performance issues. But often, the overseers work in other parts of the country or even in the United States. Several advisor commanders often struggled to reach someone who could resolve a problem.

â??The oversight managers for the contracts across Afghanistan were only at Kandahar some of the time,â?• Marcus Jackson explains. â??At best, they were a phone call away. But, other folks were in the US. So, if I had a problem first thing in the morning, I had to wait until the end of the day even to get them on the phone. And if I have a problem on Saturday morning, then Iâ??m not going to get a hold of anyone until Monday night with a resolution by Wednesday night, maybe.â?•

Aviation advisor commanders in Iraq found a significant defense contractor presence, as well. Extensive aircraft maintenance and logistics contracts supported Iraqi C-130, King Air 350, and Bell Helicopter programs. However, the largest deal was a Lockheed Martin effort to help the Iraqis employ newly purchased F-16s. This high-profile program included logistics support, maintenance training, and flight training with contractor pilots.

Because the Iraqi government purchased the aviation support contracts through the Department of State, the US embassy oversaw the contracts. This arrangement put even greater administrative and legal distance between the defense contractors and advisors working with the Iraqi Air Force. Commanders found themselves in the position of refereeing interactions between military advisors, defense contractors, and Iraqis. This required them to navigate the authorities that govern security cooperation.

For example, US military advisors to the Iraqi F-16 program faced frustrating challenges trying to build the capacity of their Iraqi partners. Sean Cosden explains, â??A lot of my tactical level advisors would get pissed at me because of the restrictions they viewed as being put on them. We had F-16 instructor pilots out of Nellis flying with the Iraqis on training support and air-to-air combat, and there was a lot of â??hey, we could be more effective if we could be doing flight lead upgrades as well.â?? However, Lockheed Martin was responsible for Iraqi F-16 upgrade training, and so if there was going to be a grade sheet involved, only a contractor instructor could fly that. We were there to advise on managing and employing a fighter squadron, not on how to turn wrenches and teach stick-and-rudder skills. We had military lawyers and lots of other folks looking at it, and while there was some grey area in the contract, it became clear that if we were going to expand, there would have to be contract modifications, which, as you know, is time and money.â?•

By virtue of their proximity, Iraqi leaders expected advisor commanders to help resolve contractor performance problems. â??I had no idea how to even understand this aspect, but we became intermediaries between the Iraqi Air Force and the contractors. Not our role,â?• according to Jim Howard. â??That was stuff the embassy bubbas were supposed to deal with, but because we had daily interactions with the partner military, we were frequently played against each other by the Iraqis. We were the guys who were supposed to merge these things together and make them fit.â?•

Building a partner nationâ??s security force is difficult. Considering the time, money, and organizational change required, building its air force is colossal. Aviation is a capital-intensive enterprise requiring expensive infrastructure, precious aircraft, and many skilled technicians. All the former commanders I spoke with agree that the US military does not have the capacity or will to do aviation security force assistance alone.

In the future, defense contractors will play a significant role in any security force assistance mission with a partner nationâ??s air force. Depending on the legal authorities used to buy aircraft, training, and equipment for the partner nation, the aviation advisor commander may only have informal oversight of the defense contractorsâ?? performance. At a minimum, they can expect to share ramp space, aircraft, and the attention of the partner nationâ??s air force with defense contractors. Commanders must knit together the efforts of both the aviation advisors and the defense contractors. Getting this piece of the air advising mission right is critical.

Fixing Aviation Security Force Assistance for Future Fights

None of the US military services have organizations large enough and with sufficient expertise to conduct aviation security force assistance to the scale that Iraq and Afghanistan required. To attenuate the negative effects of pickup team advising and the reliance on defense contracting without oversight, the best remaining option is to prepare commanders for the wide scope this mission entails.

Before selection for command, all of the officers I interviewed felt prepared, like I did, to assume a leadership role within their typical career paths. We had extensive experience with flying operations and leading aviators from our services. However, we were ill prepared for the chasmic leap to aviation advisor command.

The ideal candidate to lead a future aviation advisor mission will have professional experience directing joint operations, advising foreign militaries, coordinating security cooperation programs, leading aviation training and aircraft maintenance functions, managing support contracts, and planning and budgeting for aviation programs. I did not even come close to meeting these desired characteristics, nor did most of the commanders I interviewed. The few who did readily admitted that luck and timing, not foresight, brought them to the mission.

But even exceptionally well-prepared commanders will only be on the job for one year, the length of a typical deployment. The Department of Defense cannot count on aviation advisor commanders with rare skills to emerge year after year to lead this critical mission. Building a partner nationâ??s air force takes many years or decades. In the cases of the Afghan and Iraqi air forces, there is no end in sight. The services must find a way, beyond current advisor schools and introductory courses, to fill in

knowledge and experience gaps before commanders set foot onto the partner militaryâ??s airfield.

As a start, the military services should give aviation advisor commanders executive-level courses on contracting and international arms sales. Tailored briefings on security cooperation, acquisitions, and defense contractor management must follow. Combatant and component commands also should design future aviation advisor organizations to include more robust contracting oversight as well as foreign area officers. These changes would help shore up the personal and organizational deficiencies commanders face.

The term that came up consistently in my interviews was â??ad hoc.â?• Across the Department of Defense, there is no proven method for building a partner nationâ??s aviation forces in the middle of an insurgency. Until there is one, commanders will both lead an improvised team of military advisors and defense contractors and employ their own inventive and enterprising approach to the mission.

For us, there was an upside to the uncertainty and complexity of commanding an aviation advisor organizationâ??license. As Brad Bridges describes it, â??It was up to me to figure it out. Despite all of its frustrating elements in getting support, it was the most autonomy I had in my career. I was given latitude to make it happen, which was refreshing.â?• Almost all of the former aviation advisor commanders I interviewed expressed similar sentiments. I also embraced the freedom. But considering the ad hoc nature of the way the US military organizes its advisors and resources to conduct aviation security force assistance, dysfunction and failure are never far away.

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