

Senate Democratic Policy Committee Hearing

“An Oversight Hearing on the Planning and Conduct of the War in Iraq: When Will Iraqi Security Forces Be Able to ‘Stand Up,’ So American Troops Can Begin to ‘Stand Down’?”

Stephen Pierson

Former Non-Commissioned Military Police Officer, U.S. Army

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My name is Stephen Pierson, and I am from New York State. I served as a Military Policeman during Operation Iraqi Freedom from March 2003 to August 2004. My military experience prior to Iraq was five years of active duty and one year in the New York National Guard. I left the Army in 1988 to pursue my civilian police career. During this time I have worked as a uniformed officer, investigator (including undercover assignments), instructor, supervisor and was the executive officer of my agency's training academy. I have also taught at numerous other police academies including supervisor schools.

Early in 2003, as war with Iraq appeared to be certain, I contacted a recruiter with the Army Reserve and enlisted. I had been out of the Army for fifteen years, but with my extensive civilian police experience I felt I had a set of skills that the Reserves would need. I agreed to sign up for one year with two conditions: that I be assigned to a Military Police Combat Support unit and that the unit was going to Iraq.

By June of 2003 my unit was in the Iraqi city of Al-Hillah, a large city, south of Baghdad. The unit's mission was to provide law and order in the city and to train Iraqi police officers.

I was tasked with writing the curriculum for the academy. I met with the company commander, first sergeant, noncommissioned officer in charge, and others for the specifics. It quickly became apparent that there was no template or command guidance on what should be taught, but rather the amount of time that we would teach was the only hard and fast rule. I was told that each class would run for a week and that there could be up to 200 students per class.

My initial reaction was less than enthusiastic. I protested that 40 hours was not nearly enough time to teach someone the basics of law enforcement, especially with a class size of up to 200. I was then informed that the training would not be 40 hours, but rather 20 hours because it was too hot in the afternoon to teach (the academy was being

conducted in an open air soccer stadium). My frustration increased when I learned that the fifth day of the academy would be a graduation ceremony. This in effect left only 16 hours of class time to teach up to 200 students, using an interpreter. Many of the students had been police officers under Saadam, many had no experience at all. I was told that the limits of the academy had been established by higher headquarters.

With only 16 hours of class time, I decided to concentrate on just the basics of police work. I spoke to members of another unit that had been running an academy and solicited their input. I also drew from my limited (at that time) experience from having worked with the Iraqi Police. Weapons safety was the critical course of instruction. The standard weapon for an Iraqi Policeman was the AK-47. The IPs, as they were called, had an almost universal habit of walking around with their finger on the trigger of their weapons and an equally unnerving habit of pointing it at you when speaking to them.

In addition to weapons safety, we gave abbreviated courses in the use of force, searching and handcuffing prisoners, searching a vehicle for contraband and explosives, building-clearing, note-taking and the basics of community policing. After teaching at the academy, I would return to our base, get a few hours of sleep and then go out on patrol for the night. I did see some improvement with the IPs performance, especially in the area of weapons safety.

After a couple of months of working with the IPs, we were starting to make some progress with them as far as their response to calls and how they treated the public and prisoners.

We were then told to “stand down” our responses with the IPs. Orders had come down telling us to let the IPs handle calls, we were supposed to observe. This effectively ended our joint patrols with the IPs and stopped any continued progress we could have made. Our patrols were actually reprimanded for getting involved in police situations and not letting the IPs handle situations. Of course the reason the MP patrols had gotten involved was that the IPs were not doing an adequate job. They lacked the training, resources and the will to be effective. In short they needed our help in post-Saddam Iraq to become effective police officers.

I offer this testimony not to point blame or to have it used in partisan politics. Victory is our only choice in Iraq. Anything less dishonors the men and women of this country’s armed forces, places the people of Iraq in danger of living under a new regime of terror, and will further destabilize the Middle East. We need to ramp up our commitment to training by dedicating the resources needed to train and equip the Iraqi police, army and security forces. We need to do now what we didn’t do in 2003 when it would have been easier.

If we and the Iraqi government want well-trained forces in Iraq, then they need to be given the best training, the best equipment and the best pay. We need to reach out to other moderate Arab countries in the area have them assist in our training efforts of the

Iraqi security forces. We should also consider bringing small Iraqi units to the United States for training. I do not have the big picture perspective of a command level officer. I do however, have the perspective of someone who was there, saw what worked and what did not. I am proud of my service, the military and my country.