

Iraq, Amundsen, and the Zouaves

Marines need to be smarter and more culturally in tune with their environment

by John W. Kiser

Roald Amundsen offered Americans some food for thought on 23 January. Unfortunately, it was delivered only an hour before President George W. Bush's State of the Union address and to a location few would have visited anyway to seek wisdom about Iraq. At first blush, defeating our enemies in Iraq (and elsewhere) may seem to have little to do with the Norwegian explorer's successful navigation through the Northwest Passage in 1903. The Public Broadcasting Service program, *Nova*, ran a story about why he succeeded when so many others before him had failed. America is now stuck in the equivalent of an ice field pressing on all sides. There are few perfect analogies in life, but one can try to combine lessons from different life or death experiences. Amundsen's seems too obvious to ignore, especially given the timing of the show's release. What then are the elements that could possibly connect Amundsen with Iraq and the Zouaves?

The answers are his insight that smaller was better for getting through the ice and his appreciation, unusual at the time, of the value of native knowledge to survive in the Arctic. Seventy years earlier, French officers, struggling with the pacification of North Africa after liberating it from the terrible Turk, had discovered the importance of employing native troops for the same reason Amundsen studied at the feet of the Inuit people—their local knowledge and adaptability to the physical environment. The Zouaves were one of the French's most successful experiments in doing what the U.S. military

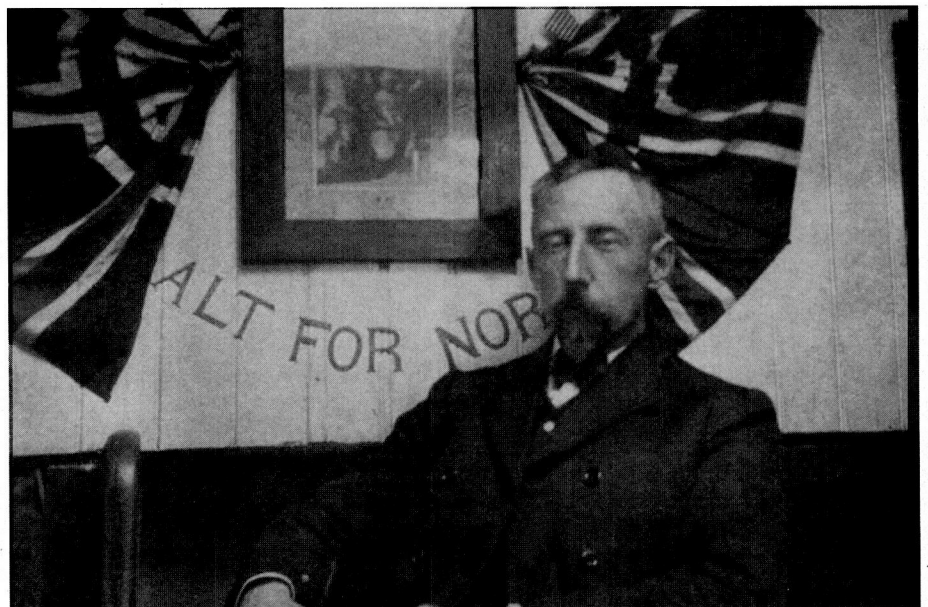
>Mr. Kiser, a fellow at the Center for Religion and Democracy at the University of Virginia. He is the author of *The Monks of Tibhirine: Faith, Love, and Terror in Algeria* (St. Martin's Press, 2002).

needs to explore to succeed in Iraq and in the so-called "long war" against Islamic insurgencies around the world.

The argument that follows is this. A much smaller, regionally "earmarked" military force capable of navigating the cultural and political shoals of Iraq would allow for a more refined, adaptive approach against a protean enemy, some of whom are al-Qaeda terrorists, some criminals, some Ba'athist dead-enders, but most of whom are angry and unemployed Iraqis whose lives

have been made more miserable by the American presence. These elements of opposition to the United States are embedded now in a sectarian conflict (as a tactic to make the country ungovernable) unleashed indirectly by the U.S. invasion, creating a degree of complexity that only an unflinching American arrogance could believe is solvable without "native" knowledge, sensibilities, and wisdom.

First, let's have a word about the famous explorer. Amundsen's father died while he was an infant, and if his mother had had her way, Amundsen would have become a medical doctor, not an explorer—a calling she saw as offering little security. But all of those years that his mother thought he was diligently studying medical books, Amundsen had in fact been reading



Capt Roald Amundsen in the cabin of his boat, the Gjoa. (Photo from the National Geographic, "Honors for Admndsen," January 1918, p. 56.)



If they are thought of as "ragheads" by the troops, we will never succeed. (Photo by Cpl Michael S. Cifuentes.)

about past expeditions, especially those of an intrepid Englishman named Sir John Franklin, who died on his third Arctic expedition in 1845.

While he was in medical school Amundsen's mother died. Released from his sense of filial duty, the young student pursued the dream he had had since he was a small boy—to be the first to navigate the elusive Northwest Passage. Amundsen accomplished his dream by the ripe old age of 31.

His years of clandestinely assessing the mistakes of others had led Amundsen to a revolutionary Zen-like conclusion. Less would be more. To navigate the unpredictable, ever-changing ice flows, previous expeditions had always assumed the need for brute force to break through the ice. This meant big, heavy ships and large crews—as many as 65 men per boat. But large crews required enormous amounts of supplies. In the end Amundsen succeeded because of intensive study and preparation, drawing correct conclusions from past experience, and using a 70-foot fishing vessel with a crew of six.

No ship, then or today, including those with 75,000 horsepower engines, can defeat a hard icepack. A small, sturdy, and relatively light fishing boat with a highly skilled crew could do two

things that larger boats could not. His boat could slip through narrow openings in the ice and, with a shallow draft, could go closer to shore where warmer water could mean less ice.

When Amundsen put in to winter on Prince William Island, he met curious Inuit "savages," as non-Europeans were known in the Victorian era. He soon came to another revolutionary conclusion—the natives had indispensable survival knowledge for men unfamiliar with such a hostile environment as arctic Canada. It was not the mentality of the Victorian era to think of native people as possessing useful knowledge. Explorers didn't win praise for bringing home anthropological insights about primitive people whom they were ultimately supposed to uplift. Instead, it was the Victorian way to lug their way of life with them, which meant thousands of pounds of supplies and, with a few exceptions (like Sir Richard Burton), a distinct lack of curiosity about native culture. Realizing very soon the valuable survival knowledge possessed by the Inuits, Amundsen decided to spend a second winter to master the various skills his team would need. It was not a popular decision with his crew. But it saved their lives.

They learned how to catch seal, hunt caribou, and recognize other sources of food in the icy desert that surrounded them. They learned how to construct igloos, appreciate the superior insulating properties of caribou fur over their own Victorian woolens, use dogsleds, and treat the sled skis with moss and saliva so that they would sail easily over any kind of snow. Amundsen kept his crew alive because he went native and didn't carry the Victorian baggage of the "white man's burden"—believing he was so superior to the indigenous population that he couldn't learn from them. He learned how to adapt to the hostile environment in which he found himself.

Acknowledging that there are voices in the United States today that recognize the applicability of Amundsen's wisdom, they are nevertheless fighting an American cultural mentality that is not so different from the Victorian one of yesteryear. The notion of seeking the wisdom of the natives in dealing with their own environment is foreign to a country whose leaders have unquestioning faith in the universal validity of "the American way," creating prefabricated views of the world that don't correspond to "ground truth." Admittedly, there is no single Iraqi voice of wisdom as to how America should extricate itself (which is not the same as "cutting and running") from the ice field of its own making. The United States has effectively created an Iraqi Government that is a dependency, vulnerable to being considered quislings by a hostile successor government, yet even the Iraqi Government leadership urges a lower U.S. profile and withdrawal to the periphery.

If small, light, and agile could be the better path to success, is creating huge, supply-intensive mini-Americas a wise approach? True, they provide as many of the morale boosting comforts of home as possible (like the Victorian generals who brought all of their china, silverware, and fine wines with them on campaigns), but they also insulate the soldiers from knowledge of the people and country they are trying to

pacify, entail huge support costs, and require a constant stream of aggressively driven convoys that anger and endanger innocent Iraqis trying to go about their lives. Hence, “less is more” might apply to the conundrum in Iraq, especially as it is also the advice of President Nouri al-Maliki and, over the longer term, would make the war more sustainable at home and abroad.

Enter the French colonial experience with native troops in Algeria, coupled with the “small boat” thinking a la Amundsen. The toughest infantry the French had during their 15-year struggle to subdue Algeria (after their initial liberation of the Arabs in 1830) were the native Zouaves. Zouaves were drawn from the Zouaoua Berbers in Kabyle. They were professional mercenaries who had formerly served the Turks. They knew the country and the languages, were used to “living rough,” and had a warrior culture. They could march faster and longer than the Europeans in the French Army of North Africa. They were led initially by French officers and, over time, became an elite unit that Europeans wanted to join—and eventually had even Christian, Muslim, and Jewish regiments. In large measure, the French owed their success in North Africa in the 19th century to skillful use of native troops who were integrated into their chain of command.

To change metaphors, America has sent a bull (in big boats) to fight wasps (in kayaks). In a fight where it is difficult, if not impossible, for American soldiers to distinguish good wasps from bad wasps, the only way to fight in a manner that isn’t constantly creating more angry wasps is to gain cultural and situational knowledge that only local Iraqis possess. This is hardly a new insight.

During the Vietnam War, the acknowledged success of the Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN) Ranger, parachute, and selected ARVN units, as well as the Vietnamese Marines, trained by Army and Marine personnel, demonstrated American ability to effectively use native troops. Unfortu-



Private, French 2d Zouaves, 1854. (Photo from *Rene North, Military Uniforms, 1686–1918, Grosset & Dunlap, New York, 1970, p. 61.*)

nately, there were not enough of such soldiers. But how do we implement Amundsen’s insight about small and agile with his use of local knowledge that could be both militarily and politically effective today? Perhaps by doing something that sounds colonial and un-American, but isn’t.

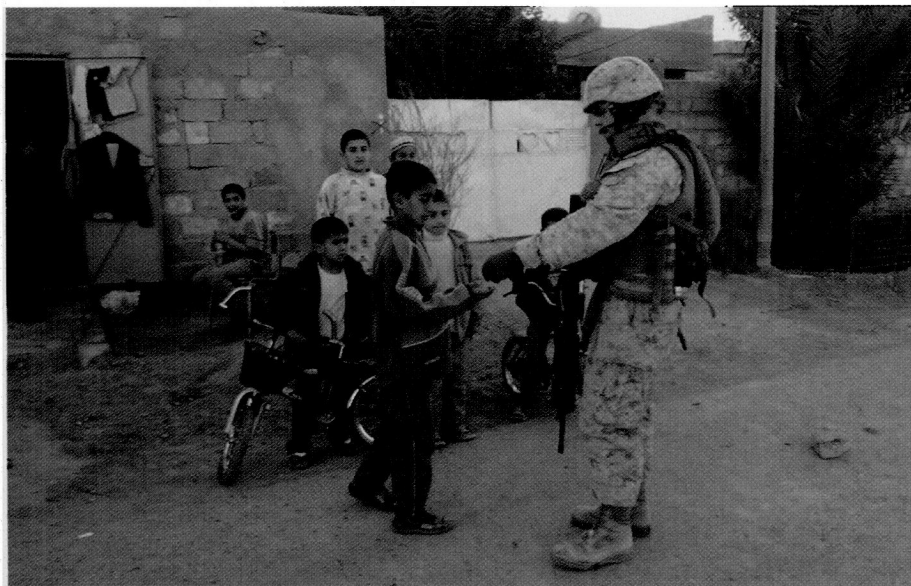
- Create an Army of the Middle East, consisting of career officers and men

who are dedicated to working in Arab speaking countries and committed to learning Arabic and acquiring cultural knowledge—of going native like Amundsen, if only to survive and succeed.

- Create from scratch a certain number of mixed battalions (or brigades) selectively recruited from the Iraqi Army and police who, like the Zouaves, know the language and have local knowledge and tolerance for living rough but are stationed among the people. These become our combined action units of the past, only now our wasps are interbred to gain the best traits of both species, and are adapted for Iraqi conditions. Like the Marine combined action platoons (CAPs) in Vietnam, they would have medical, intelligence gathering functions, and social work as part of their mission. The Vietnam-era CAPs deployed squad-sized units that were light and agile. They went native, built trust, and worked and lived with local village militias for months at a time outside fixed bases. They were very effective. We need to take it one step further in Iraq.

The native recruits would be offered (with the concurrence of the Iraqi Government) a 5-year contract to serve in specialized counterinsurgency units of the U.S. Marine Corps or Army. If their 5 years of service ends with an honorable discharge, they receive the same benefits as their American counterparts and will automatically acquire U.S. citizenship (or at least guaranteed U.S. residence) without losing their Iraqi citizenship. Dual citizenship would give Iraqi soldiers the security of not ending up like the Harkis in Algeria who served the French so well and were later disowned by GEN Charles de Gaulle and brutally murdered as collaborators by the newly independent Algerian Government.

This military miscegenation will have a two-way educational benefit as well as structurally build into the U.S. military the skills and knowledge it will need for a long time, thus estab-



Will the young Iraqi have good memories of the Marines who patrolled his hometown? (Photo by Cpl Luke Blom.)

lishing what is now missing in U.S.-Iraqi relations—a sense of mutual respect, trust, and true comradeship. The “ragheads” attitude toward Arabs held by many U.S. Marines and soldiers has to disappear, unless we are going to wage total war and reduce the whole population into abject, gelatinous submission as we did to Japan, with the help of an atomic bomb.

- Rethink the rotational policies of the military. Current policies, which are centered around the movements of large units, are constantly disrupting the learning curve and the hard-won relationships with the locals that are vital to success. A small corps of men and women is needed, married with monk-like dedication to their Services and committed to “stabilizing” Iraq (or other regions) while working respectfully with Iraqis. The ablest officers in the French Army who finally subdued Algeria in 1848 had served for 15 years in that theater.

The popular movie, *The Battle of Algiers*, and Alistair Horne’s *A Savage War of Peace* (New York Review Books Classics, 2006) have focused U.S. military attention on French strategic failures in spite of tactical successes during the Algerian “rebellion” against 132 years of French rule. In many ways the French

experience of liberating Algeria and using native troops in the 1830s and 1840s is more directly relevant to the United States in Iraq, for France was as much of a neophyte to Arab culture then as the United States is today. Yet the French did some things right, and one of them was their use of local knowledge and listening to it. For a time the Zouaves were considered by many military observers to be the best infantry in the world. (The future general, George B. McClellan, as a military observer during the Crimean War of 1854–56, was deeply impressed by the fighting spirit and aggressive tactics of the Zouaves.)

It might be useful to remember that the English have struggled with the Irish Republican Army since 1916, despite knowing something about the land, the language, and the culture. If the United States is truly in a long war in parts of the world about which it knows nothing, the military needs to acquire the cultural, linguistic, and situational knowledge required to fight long-term, low-intensity conflicts in ways that will not produce more recruits for the enemy than it eliminates. Such thinking is now accepted wisdom in counterinsurgency circles. However, the military also needs to find ways to preserve this knowledge so it doesn’t

have to be constantly reacquired at great cost in blood and money. Selective recruitment and integration of local cultural and warfighting expertise into a flexible and fleet-footed regional counterinsurgency force could provide a long-term strategy to address this need. Such “local” resources should not feel the same pressing need to “go home” as American troops. They are already at home. That would be their value to American efforts.

A smaller, more culturally knowledgeable force committed to building long-term, sustainable relationships would likely please most Iraqis, as well as President Maliki, who wants U.S. troops to withdraw to the periphery and be a more discreet presence. Big footprints, counterinsurgency specialists agree, need to give way to small, discreet, and intelligently discriminating footprints; that is, fewer huge, easy-to-target base camps and more small groups of military personnel living among the people in the precincts where the local population lives—without air conditioning, National Football League games, or Starbucks.

A leaner, smarter, regionally dedicated force would please an American public that wants fewer troops in Iraq, and it would still be consistent with the victory-only attitude that Americans normally prefer, assuming we can define victory and are intelligently led. Fighting from a smaller, maneuverable, Amundsen-like boat could be politically and economically sustainable over the long term, and America could uphold its moral obligation to rebuild Iraq in partnership with Iraqis.



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