

# **The Commander and His Performance - Expectations and Myths**

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## *Abstract:*

*The presentation is based on the authors' experience from the deployment in Iraq (April 2003 - September 2003) and Afghanistan (October 2002 - December 2002). The "process of commanding" in units which were set together - ad hoc - right before mission is rather complicated. Such units consist of people who are - on regular basis - used to the superior position and now they have to follow the orders. And vice versa. Everybody brings with himself some experience and expectations. And since the reality is very often discrepant - the communication between soldier and his commander could be very complicated.*

Ladies and Gentlemen,

let us share our experience from the missions in Iraq and Afghanistan with you. The experiences from both missions are almost the same, so let us start with the Iraq - since the length of stay was longer. From April to September 2003 P. Kral was working there as a clinical psychologist at the 7<sup>th</sup> Field Hospital of the Army of the Czech Republic. Since the general topic of this year's IAMPS concerns the leadership in the military environment we are not going to speak about the clinical psychology work although it is very interesting as well.

At the very beginning - in order to help you better understand the conditions in Iraq - let us tell you some details about the mission itself. Originally there was a political decision to send the Field Hospital to the Southern

Iraq. The hospital consists of approximately 150 people. (Only the number of 40 are the medical doctors and nurses.) The whole contingent was one of the units which are set together ad hoc - short time before the mission and only for the purpose of abroad deployment. Although usually there is no problem to find people willing to serve abroad - this time the situation was much more complicated. There were no complications to find for example the guarding platoon - those guys were looking forward to the dangerous and adventurous service but medical doctors, nurses and other experts (vet, biochemist, pharmaceuticals etc.) - no matter they are also military personnel - usually prefer safer work conditions. As a result all members of the contingent were sent abroad by order. It happened the first time in the history of the Army of the Czech Republic - until this time all soldiers in the abroad missions were considered to be the volunteers. Moreover the time for "agglutination" was as short as six weeks. During this preparation period more units were added to the original contingent (platoon of engineers, CIMIC, NSE, etc.) - at the end there were more than 300 people the double of original intention. A few of the units were sent as the organic ensemble (the guarding platoon, the engineers) but most of them were enregimented from people coming from the whole Army. In its consequences it meant that soldiers who were to work together had not known each other often, the commanders at all levels had not known their subordinates and moreover people who were normally used to the commanding position were put in the subordinates' role and on the contrary people chosen as the commanders had not been commanding anybody during their regular service. It had showed up that people who are used to take responsibility for their decisions can feel as "ripped off" and the ones whose daily business is to obey the orders usually feel discomfort when forced to take decisions not only for themselves but also for the others. It is obvious that

hereunder it was almost impossible to leave for the place of deployment as the well trained and organized unit.

As a part of psychologist's job there we performed an interview with all of the soldiers - in order to know how they feel and to find out whether there is anybody showing serious psychopathological symptoms. During those interviews significant number of soldiers complained of commander of some level. Finally when doing some statistics we were surprised with the elusive findings. 37% of soldiers were not satisfied with the level of commanding. We think that the amount of unsatisfied was even higher but not everybody expressed this opinion. None of them complained about the strictness, demands or hardness of commanders. But on contrary they were dissatisfied with the insecurity, doubts, vacillation and non-expertness. It had showed up that people who find themselves in the war conditions and who are surrounded by the enemy atmosphere need to be led by people whom they believe.

From the statements of the members of the contingent ensues:

1. Soldiers generally tend to expect the same style of work and communication as the one they are used to.
2. People who are normally in the superior positions are very critical towards their temporary commanders and have problems to accept the subordinate role.
3. Soldiers in subordinate position are more likely to pardon the lack of commander's special skills than insufficiency in the leading capabilities.
4. The ad-hoc-set units usually suffer from the lack of the group cohesion.
5. Although the most of the soldiers are well trained professionals the level of team proficiency is often lower.

The "problematic" commander can also usually see that something is wrong. They are not blind and often try to change things but the environment of the mission does not give them many chances since the deployment represents time to act and perform rather than train and learn. Moreover when at home the commander has to concern only about the professional part of the soldiers' life but in the abroad mission there is also need to take into the consideration the leisure time.

At the conclusion we would like to emphasize that not all of the missions of the Army of the Czech Republic face the same problem. The most of the abroad missions are more likely "combat" aimed and the units which are sent abroad are what we call "organic units". It means units which are not set up just before the mission but which train and work together regularly. People in such units usually know each other for years, so we can find a functional structure and hierarchy there.

This presentation does not want to criticize our Army. We just would like to publish - here in front of the audience of professionals - our experiences from the work with people with high personal proficiency who were put into the wrong position in the military hierarchy and were given almost no time to get used to it.