

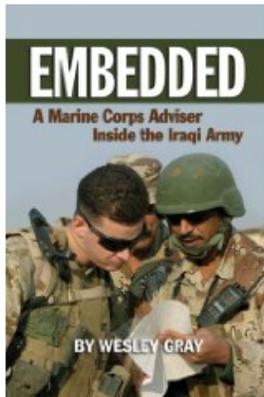


SMALL WARS JOURNAL

smallwarsjournal.com

Embedded: A Marine Corps Adviser Inside the Iraqi Army

Reviewed by Niel Smith



Embedded: A Marine Corps Adviser Inside the Iraqi Army by Wesley Gray, Naval Institute Press, 2009, 256 pages.

Embedded presents a tale not often told among the growing collection of memoirs by former company grade officers who served in Iraq and Afghanistan. Marine Capt. Wesley Gray served as an embedded combat adviser with an Iraqi battalion in Haditha, Iraq, during 2006. Gray deserves great credit for shining the spotlight the critical effort to develop competent Iraqi security forces. For those who have never had the pleasure of closely working as an embed, Gray's narrative reveals the herculean challenges that most combat advisers face.

Although limited in scope to his location and time in Iraq, the situations he encounters are common to most advisers in Iraq. Gray's account of his learning curve is the strongest aspect of the book. During his tour, Gray learns how to build rapport and truly understand his partners. Gray takes the time to learn both the local language and culture, which pays dividend and is a key to effective combat advising. After first attempting to lead from the front, he eventually learns how to work "by, with, and through" his partners. He demonstrates real empathy for the Iraqis, and genuinely cares about his charges. He frankly describes the many moral challenges associated with combat advising in Iraq, including prisoner abuse, theft, poor leadership, and corruption. Gray's narrative is at its best describing the fine line an adviser walks with his partners when confronting these issues.

Gray's tale has several critical flaws that hold it back from an unqualified recommendation. Gray commits the error of assuming all Iraqi army units suffered similar leadership and combat effectiveness challenges, reflected through the many editorial comments of the book. Many who worked closely with Iraqi Army in the same period experienced competent and even exceptional Iraqi Army performance, despite identical logistical and administrative challenges. Not all Iraqi Army units resembled 7th IA division. Indeed, an experienced Marine Combat Advisor I consulted with for this review described a very different embedded experience with neighboring 1st Iraqi Army Division. Gray continues his error when assessing Iraq as a whole, extrapolating the character of the Iraqi people as a whole from his Shia Army partners and the local citizens of Haditha. The author's commentary and

conclusions would have benefitted from a broader experience outside of his single seven-month experience in 2006.

The largest weakness in Gray's book is its ridicule of nearly anyone who is not the author. The Marine centric chest thumping and attacks against other services that do little for his narrative except turn others off from a book that contains solid insights. The Army and Air Force are skewered at every opportunity. Gray's narrative is tinged with bitterness that steps over the fine line between "telling it like it is" and engaging in *ad hominem* attacks. Curiously, the author performs little such analysis on himself. Gray's bravado filled concluding paragraphs tout his team as the "best adviser crew Iraq has ever seen", despite the near dissolution of his partner unit, which by his own account experienced a 70 percent desertion rate during his team's embed. While many of the factors were beyond Gray's control, the chest pounding only detracts from the story. A re-write to eliminate the vitriol of the second and final chapters would greatly enhance the book's appeal. Indeed, *Embedded's* conclusion surprisingly fails to offer a consolidated reflection of Gray's experience, failing to summarize the enduring lessons learned and potential policy recommendations for the services as they strive to improve the selection and training of advisers.

Despite the above reservations, *Embedded* is well suited for Soldiers or Marines preparing to embed with the Iraqi Army for the first time. Those who have worked closely with the Iraqi Army will identify with much of Gray's experience, and share in his frustrations. I commend Gray for thoroughly documenting his Sisyphean experience. I hope that future accounts by combat advisers improve upon the solid foundation begun by Capt. Gray.

Major Niel Smith is an Armor officer assigned to the United States Army and Marine Corps Counterinsurgency Center at the Combined Arms Center in Fort Leavenworth, Kansas. He works on counterinsurgency issues for the force. He has two tours encompassing nearly 29 months in Operation Iraqi Freedom at the Company to Brigade level. As a company commander, he was partnered and co-located with 1st Battalion, 2d Brigade, 3d Iraqi Army Division in Tal Afar in 2006.

This is a single article excerpt of material published in [Small Wars Journal](#).
Published by and COPYRIGHT © 2009, Small Wars Foundation.

Permission is granted to print single copies for personal, non-commercial use. Select non-commercial use is licensed via a Creative Commons BY-NC-SA 3.0 license and per our [Terms of Use](#). We are in this together.



No FACTUAL STATEMENT should be relied upon without further investigation on your part sufficient to satisfy you in your independent judgment that it is true.

Contact: comment@smallwarsjournal.com

Visit www.smallwarsjournal.com

Cover Price: Your call. [Support SWJ here.](#)