



CompanyCommand

Building Combat-Ready Teams



To: Company Commanders
From: Company Commanders

Insights from OEF: Commanding in Afghanistan

Afghanistan is not Iraq. As we train our units to deploy to Afghanistan, we keep in mind that our experiences and lessons from OIF may not always apply in OEF. To help leaders who are preparing for OEF, the Company-Command forum is surveying and interviewing com-

pany-level commanders who have recent experience in Afghanistan. Their responses are available in the CC forum. Listen in to some of the advice offered voluntarily by OEF veteran commanders to their brothers and sisters in arms.

Jeremy Turner

Commander, D/2-504 PIR, 82nd ABN DIV

Operated in Kandahar, April 2005–March 2006

Be ready for a determined enemy who will fight you toe-to-toe for hours and days on end. There are certainly elements of the counterinsurgency fight, but there are most definitely large groups of 15- to 20-year-old madrassa students who want to get their jihad on. In all honesty, we (myself included) were not mentally ready to be in as tough a fight as it became. OEF is not a peace-keeping mission.

The next point I would add is the importance of the terrain to every aspect of the enemy, yourself and the general population. The mountainous terrain acts to isolate populations from one another, creating different paradigms within each valley. In one valley, there may be a heated rivalry between

two warlords of different tribes or subtribes. Every event that occurs within that area can be laid against the backdrop of that particular ongoing soap opera. In the next valley, those two warlords may be virtual unknowns, and, instead, drug trafficking and smuggling could be a major problem. In many areas, water may be the key friction point between multiple tribes/villages. In the next, it could be corruption in the police force, and in another area, the problem may be hard-core jihadists and Taliban forces. This fact acts to change the enemy TTPs and makes universal TTPs for you more difficult to employ. This, in my mind, highlights the importance of trust on the battlefield between subordinate company and platoon leadership. I believe the conventional forces who have responsibility for patrolling a particular area become the experts on the ground. SF, TF IED, intel guys and superhuman

units who can kill people with their hair can all be great assets, but at the end of the day, you are the experts.

Fight the urge to wait on the FOB for perfect intelligence and the perfect combination of forces to then conduct a point raid on the objective. You will get a better feel for the battlespace if you conduct movement to contacts and let intel during the mission drive your next decisions. If you allow some other BOS element to completely control your timing, you will miss opportunities. Sometimes it is unavoidable, but generally let intel (not other BOS elements) drive maneuver. If you take choppers too often to conduct those



Soldiers from C/3-71 CAV, 10th Mountain Division, climb to an observation point in the mountains of Konar Province.

perfect point raids, you will probably get shot down eventually. It is physically and mentally more difficult to execute a mission for an extended period. Most point raids result in just missing the enemy HVT by about five to 10 minutes. Once you are on the ground, kick out some elements along those most likely exfil routes to try to get the large group of military-age males leaving the scene. Then spend a few days (not a few minutes) in the area developing intel.

Also, don't be afraid to embrace religion to establish some commonalities. I would make references to us all being sons of Abraham and what Allah will say when you die, and so on. I had a hard time getting the hang of this, but it was worth it when I did. Just use very illustrative terms and stories to get your point across. Don't worry if some people don't think this kind of talk is politically correct; it will undoubtedly help you to relate to your average Afghan.

Finally, think through CERP and projects. If you build a clinic or a school, you will create a target for the Taliban that has to be staffed, resourced and protected, which are huge headaches. If you build a road or a bridge, you will enhance the local ANA's and ANP's ability to influence events by them getting there sooner (security), help open up markets for the farmers (reduce opium cultivation) and open the area up socially. (I saw women's music being sold in bazaars about four weeks after a major road opened up.) Opening an area up socially acts to put the Taliban on the defensive and helps to alienate them from the population when they butt stroke

someone who just likes the tunes. Use local contractors whenever possible. This employs local hands, ensures timeliness and responsibility and builds respect for village (and elected) leaders. This eventually leads to the villagers building and funding their own school, and therefore they have an intrinsic desire to protect it. That's something that no amount of lectures can produce. They have to see it to believe it.

Aaron Swain

Commander, C CO/3-71 CAV, 10th MTN DIV

Operated in Upper Kunar and Eastern Nuristan Provinces,

February 2006–July 2006

OEF is a true counterinsurgency fight that is getting hotter and hotter with each rotation. The key to winning is in the local population. Don't forget this! You must win them to the side of the Government of Afghanistan while helping the local Afghan Security Forces provide a secure environment. The local population is stuck between a ruthless enemy who kills them for even talking to us and the Coalition. Do everything you can to show them that their country is improving. CERP roads using local labor are the best. With a road comes almost everything else an Afghan could want. Promote the GoA while still respecting and endorsing the tribal system.

Tactically, mortars and snipers are the greatest killers in the mountains of Afghanistan. Become an expert at the battle drill "react to ambush." Learn how to turn it around



CPT Aaron Swain and Soldiers from 3-71 CAV, 10th Mountain Division, pose for a picture in Ghaziabad District, Konar Province, with the district governor, Afghan security officials and members of the local police.



A convoy of vehicles from the 10th Mountain Division moves through a snowstorm in Afghanistan.

quickly through superior firepower and CAS. Get into some serious walking shape; you will carry loads well over 80 pounds even when you trim all the fat from your combat load. Be prepared to lose leaders as a result of injuries, wounds and death.

Jason Toole

**Commander, A (Sapper)/3rd Brigade Special Troops Battalion
Operated in Lowgar and Paktia (Gardez) Provinces,
February–June 2006**

One of the things I learned early on was that if you are *not* doing things with the ANA or ANP integrated with you, you won't be as successful; you won't be seen as legitimate. If you are going to do a larger mission (cordon and search, for example), then you will work with the ANA; but if you have a quick opportunity to act based on a piece of actionable intel, it is quicker and more effective to call up the ANP and get them to send a couple guys with you. So it is important that you develop relationships with them.

I worked really hard on developing relationships with the ANP, and it paid off. By the end of my time, we would do anything we could to support them, from giving them things to supporting their operations. They would give us a call when they were in contact. One time the ANP was in a fight and we rolled A-10s for the ANP down the KG pass when they were being attacked. Although the A-10s only hit the burners and chaff, it showed the enemy that the coalition is here backing the ANP. This meant the world to the ANP, who found a huge cache on that mission that was so big it took us several days to reduce.

My actionable intel came almost exclusively from the ANP. I never worked with the ANP in Gardez, which was a major urban center. Out in the countryside, you find police leaders who actually want to make a difference. Some of them are angry at the Taliban, but they are often hamstrung and treated abysmally by the bureaucracy. Some of them are not supplied with ammunition or fuel and are not paid—they feel like they have to illegally tax the locals in order to feed their

your TERPs and treating them like humans instead of voice machines make a big difference in how they interact with people on your behalf. I wanted them to express the emotion that I was displaying. One thing you can do is try not to be ethnocentric and stomp around like the big American cowboy. Be the humble guest—even if you aren't necessarily a humble guest, because I know we have a lot more capability than a humble guest comes with—conveying the message to whomever you are working with: "I'm here to help, I want to be a good Afghan." Learn as much about the customs as you can. Be comfortable sitting, drink the goat milk from the one ladle that gets passed around the circle, eat the goat liver, have the conversation about family—tell them about your kids before you talk business—all that good stuff. Snort the tea loudly to let them know you enjoy it, do whatever you can to be Afghan in your affect as soon as possible—it pays big dividends. Ask questions about being an Afghan, and tell them you are trying to be a good Afghan. All that kind of stuff really builds inroads working with village officials. You have to be Afghan to be successful.

Bill Davis

**Commander, C/173d BSB, 173D ABCT
Operated in Bagram and Kandahar,
February 2005–February 2006**

Everything you do at the tactical level has the potential to impact operational and even strategic plans and policies. Hard knocks on the wrong door may impact national ROE. Losing battlefield awareness and hitting an ANA/ANP/PAK unit with CAS may slow down tripartite talks. Mistakes due to ignorance of cultural/religious differences may incite a riot that plays every 15 minutes on CNN. Everything you do can have far-reaching impacts. Positive tactical events can have the same level of impacts, so choose your actions wisely.

Every operation you conduct needs to be fully synchronized with all the battlefield operating systems; know what assets are available and the capabilities of each. Medevac support to operations in Afghanistan is a challenge (to the



CPT Joe Geraci controls the ground elements during a company-level, time-sensitive-target air-assault operation in Paktika Province in August 2005, while his joint tactical air controller assists in controlling fixed-wing and rotary-wing aircraft.

point of calculating risk) because of geographic dispersion, terrain, altitude, weather, angle of illumination and available platforms. Know the process, know the capabilities of the aircraft and know the risks involved with conducting operations. We supported/conducted several civilian medical assistance missions with various goals in mind. All of them supported the commander on the ground and served some greater purpose than just the necessary humanitarian aid. Some events were a reward for cooperation, some a way of getting a foot in the door to a denied area and others to gauge the sentiment of the population and glean information. This is just one example of using an available asset to accomplish your mission, but every BOS brings something to the fight. Know and use what you have available.

Don't be afraid to make stuff up as you go. One of the best traditions of our military throughout its history has been its ability to adapt to changing battlefields. Enforce the nonnegotiables of our trade (the Army Values, human rights, Laws of War, etc.) but give your Soldiers the latitude to be creative in accomplishing their missions. Soldiers find out before most commanders what works and what doesn't.

Joseph Geraci

Commander, A Co, 1-508th ABN, 173rd ABN BDE

Operated in Paktika Province (Eastern and Southern Districts),

February 2005–February 2006

Every operation has to be Afghan-led. In other words, Afghan battalion-size missions with U.S. forces performing

only IRF missions, and with ETTs forward with Afghans to allow commitment of U.S. fixed-wing and Medevac assets. Many of the Afghans think that the U.S. forces will go away and the locals will be stuck with the enemy. Therefore, many of them, especially in areas close to the border, are wary of providing support to the Afghan government. To alleviate this perception, the locals must see that the ANA, ANP and ABP are effective and are here for the long haul. We must continue to train them so that they are indeed effective security forces (and we can truly work ourselves out of a job in Afghanistan). By seeing effective security elements and by having an effective and legitimate Afghan government, the Afghans who are apprehensive will start working with the government and provide more intelligence.

It is key to get Afghan forces to provide constant and permanent presence forward. Throughout the entire process, your Soldiers must always operate with disciplined professionalism and treat the local Afghans with dignity and respect. Everyone needs to be trained on how to speak and interact with local nationals. Being able to speak key Afghan phrases provides you instant credibility in the eyes of the Afghans. There is no better way to drive the locals toward the enemy than by disrespecting an Afghan.

There are two components to defeating the enemy: taking away his safe haven/ population support base and killing him. Taking away his safe haven comes through presence patrols, strengthening the Afghan security forces (ANA, ANP and ABP) and getting the people to believe that

their life will be better by supporting the local Afghan government rather than the enemy forces. The most important factors in killing the enemy are tactical patience and analysis. You cannot force the intelligence to fit the operational plan. It absolutely has to be the other way around. The enemy is a creature of habit and sets patterns. To kill him, you must decipher his patterns, capitalize on his weaknesses and then strike.

Scott Halter

Commander, B/3rd Bn, 158th Avn Regt (TF Storm),

Based out of Kandahar and Bagram, March 2005–February 2006

Afghanistan is not Iraq. Most leaders with OIF experience seem to think OEF will be a lot like OIF. There are some significant differences I'd like to highlight. First, geography matters. Take a look at some maps of Afghanistan and you will quickly realize you are going to one of the most geographically challenging countries in the world. If you're an aviation unit, this is particularly important. Power management and mountain flying are of the utmost importance during training. Poor power management and complacency are the number one cause of class A accidents in OEF. Second, the enemy is very motivated. Without going into any classified detail, I will say that OEF is at times still very much an offensive operation, and aviation is at the center of it all. Do not underestimate the enemy's adaptive ability and their motivation to stand and fight toe-to-toe.

Sean Macrae

Commander, C/1-508

Operated in Paktika and Southern Ghazni,

February 2005–February 2006

One thing that remained constant, particularly in Paktika, is that the local populace was the key to all success with regard to consistently influencing the enemy. The largest threat was the pressure plate IED, which was usually conveniently placed at choke points. With the exception of three IED strikes in my AO (two on local nationals and one

on a Humvee), every other IED was discovered and reported to my elements by local nationals before we hit it. I wholeheartedly believe it was the consistent, strong, fair and tribally unbiased relationship with the populace my Soldiers gained and maintained that facilitated this support. In addition, I think this was a good metric of success as we started to see more and more caches and IEDs turned in to the FOB, the resounding theme being that the locals were tired of fighting and wanted to support their government. (I did not give any small rewards money for caches or other things.)

For anyone going to Paktika, Paktia and Kwost (aka P2K), it is absolutely critical to understand that, traditionally, these three provinces were not formally supported or required to participate in the Government of Afghanistan during the time of the Taliban or previously. There were tribal agreements that guaranteed no taxation from Kabul, support if the army needed assistance elsewhere in Afghanistan and the requirement to protect the border from the tribal regions in Pakistan. In return the P2K region was left to itself. As a result, there was no government support, education advancement or infrastructure development on any large scale in these provinces. If you have never been there you will find yourself frustrated because of the lack of perceived progress; however, the fact that there is an operational government on the provincial level, police and border police in uniform in districts, ANA operating unilaterally in many cases, and local mayors working in conjunction with the governors on some level is a huge improvement for the region—something all Afghans in the area have never seen before in their province.

Last, but not least, I struggled with being able to quantifiably express to my Soldiers if we were successful. (I had much fewer body counts and more mullahs openly endorsing the Government of Afghanistan.) We had to work very hard to quantify measures of effectiveness throughout the AO that could be reinforced within the company. All the average rifleman in southern Paktika really knew was that he

drove nine hours to get from the FOB to the northern portion of the Company AO, he pulled security while the leaders attended a meeting and then moved to another location. Be creative in how you continue to keep the company informed on mission success and effectiveness in the AO, and do it routinely. Also, your measures of effectiveness and means for reaching the populace will change frequently. As Afghan leaders come and go, you see corruption in one individual and have to adjust to another leader or in-



CPT Sean Macrae and one of his platoon leaders, 1LT Kris Kerksick, meet with the shura in the Terwa District of Paktika Province in late December 2005.

Soldiers from A/1-508 PIR, 173rd ABCT jump from a hovering UH-60 helicopter during an infiltration operation in June 2006. The high elevation and rugged terrain made it impossible for the aircraft to land.

dividual, or other things. It all leads to some frustration but must be addressed, or Soldiers will become complacent and not believe what they are doing daily is having an impact in the global war on terrorism.

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Commander, Delta Battery, 319th AFAR,
173rd ABCT
Operated in Regional Command East,
April 2005–March 2006

You can't be in all locations all the time, so you have to trust your young leaders to make the right decisions. That said, battlefield circulation is a must. My 1SG and I spent the entire deployment flying from fire base to fire base, checking on Soldiers and positioning ourselves at key locations for BN-size operations to provide that senior mentorship and to free up the PLT leadership to execute the desired operation. You must have standard reports for your PLTs to follow—that is the only way you will know what is going on at each of your PLTs. The reports I used consisted of mission fired reports, ammo matrices, weekly role-up reports and more.

Logistics is key. I was a separate battery and did not have a higher level headquarters to run all classes of supply. My robust HQ section located at Bagram worked 24-hour operations, ensuring that all the PLTs were supplied with Class V and a level of PLL so that the PLTs could fix howitzers as needed. The use of CDS was key to the battery maintaining a level of class V to support any operation,

be it DS to a unit in a TIC or counterrocket fire. Don't let ammo be an emergency resupply every time. Push ammo on all the ring routes you can and schedule CDS drops frequently. When winter rolls in, air will be a problem. Never put yourself in a position to deny a fire mission; we fired more than 6,500 rounds in support of friendly forces. There is nothing like an Infantryman, Marine—or anyone for that matter—thanking you for providing lethal artillery fires.

Do you have recent experience leading Soldiers at the company level in Afghanistan? If so, we invite you to log on to the CompanyCommand forum, go to the Warfighting topic's "Afghan Commander" folder and join the conversation with your fellow company-grade officers. You will connect with like-minded professionals and make a difference for our Army.



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in conversation

Art by Jody Harmon