



CompanyCommand

Building Combat-Ready Teams



To: Company Commanders

From: Jim Keirse, a fellow company commander, OIF 06-08

Reflections of a Counterinsurgency Company Commander (Part 1 of 2)

I served as commander of Baker Company, 2-12 Infantry, which operated in a predominantly Sunni area of Baghdad, from January–December of 2007. Over the course of our deployment, I witnessed an increase in U.S. combat power (battalions and squadrons on the ground) and a shift in the mentality of the Iraqi populace. Somewhere in the May–June time period, our increasingly adept operations combined with national-level reconciliation momentum to drastically increase the security of our area.

My company “won” the counterinsurgency in our area. We saw a 100 percent decrease in IED and small-arms attacks. For the first quarter of our deployment, we were attacked multiple times daily; in the last quarter, there were no attacks. In the beginning, we discovered numerous dead locals every day; by the midpoint of the tour, such dead bodies were a rarity. Over the course of our deployment, the populace went from being entirely complicit with the insurgency to being supporters of our efforts to improve the area. We established a local security group of

some 200 individuals, working hand in hand with the Iraqi army (IA). Some of our success was due to the momentum of improvements all across Iraq. Most of our success, however, was due to the daily hard work of my Soldiers.

The deployment was extremely challenging. Daily decisions and circumstances would prove to either further our cause or hurt us dramatically. My company sacrificed a great deal—in lives, wounds and time—in order to win this campaign. We had an unusually talented bunch of leaders and Soldiers, particularly the company fire support officer, who assumed a great deal of responsibility for campaign efforts and coordinations. Platoon leaders, platoon sergeants, squad leaders, team leaders and individual riflemen grew to understand the people. Our guys committed themselves to winning through the people, and the results speak for themselves.

I believe the topics covered below were critical to our success. I don’t believe, however, that I have all the answers. I’m just one guy, who served at one place, during a certain period of time.

Commander Focus

A counterinsurgency commander should provide guidance for daily operations and then delegate those operations to the patrol leaders and a company patrol-tracking node. I do not think that a company commander can effectively anticipate, plan and resource for an extended campaign (12–15 months!) if he is constantly fighting the daily fight. One could argue that the company needs to focus on the daily fight and rely on battalion, with its staff, to look months out. I disagree wholeheartedly. We were given a company battlespace. Battalion is not in a position to set goals, milestones and a method of achieving those goals for each company’s battlespace—battalion doesn’t know the land and the people.

As a company commander, I spent countless hours, on patrol and in the company area, talking with my peers and subordinates and just thinking—thinking about where I wanted the AO to be in a month’s time. And in half a year. And what the AO should look like a year from now. I defined

the following goals for myself and my subordinate leaders:

- Regular and predictable delivery of essential commodities (propane, kerosene, food, electricity).
- Increased local medical capability (defined as: clinic with trauma and ambulance capability).
- No IEDs on the roads. IEDs denied by a network of local informants ready to take up arms against those who would bury bombs in their streets. (Local solution—defeat IEDs by proxy.)
- Legitimized and non-reprisal-focused Iraqi Security Forces (ISF) that interact regularly and hospitably with locals.
- Kids in school. Parents confident that kids would be safe at school.

In January of 2007, these goals were a long way off. People were terrified of the insurgent thugs who ruled by carrot and stick—distributing commodities to the complicit, hiring youths through U.S. money—and by murdering the noncomplicit. (Insurgents also spread false rumors of murders of

SSgt. Travis Platt, Company B, 2-12 Infantry, briefs his Soldiers before a patrol. SSgt. Platt defeated 45 improvised explosive devices (IEDs) and earned a Bronze Star with V device for neutralizing IED triggermen.



noncomplicit locals.) Thus terrified, folks were very reluctant to assist or cooperate with my men. The ISF we partnered with at the beginning of the deployment had a deplorable relationship with the average Sunni. Our initial partnered force was a National Police (NP) battalion perceived to be extremely sectarian. The area was ripe to become an insurgent stronghold. The insurgents co-opted American money to fund their efforts (exorbitantly priced contracts intended to fix schools, etc., with the money siphoned off to buy IEDs or hire fighters). The insurgents identified the area as a Sunni extremist enclave, a place to launch attacks at the rest of Baghdad. The ISF were terrified to go into this densely populated urban area without massing a significant force, and even then, often with guns blazing. Coalition forces toured the area daily—and made contact in the form of IEDs or SAF attack.

In order to meet our five goals, we had a lot of work to do. We had to break the campaign into bite-sized chunks. We had to prove to the folks that we could destroy the thugs among them without harming the innocent. We had to show them that

there was hope for the future, that a safe and secure area did not mean “safety and security provided by al Qaeda.” This required patience and human relationships. It also required limited surgical kinetic actions.

Our company battle rhythm changed often, but one thing remained constant: We established a nightly company huddle at a conference table in front of a map. Attendees were all patrol leaders, the FSO, XO, 1SG, enablers for the next day (when applicable), attachments, a representative from the company CP and myself. Patrol leaders covered their patrols for the day, so everyone knew what was going on in the battlespace and could share effective techniques. The



First Lt. Scott Flanigan, platoon leader of Second Platoon, Company B, conducts a rock drill with the Iraqi army during a battalion clearance operation.



Capt. Jim Keirse, Company B commander, makes initial contact with local tribal leaders. Once a relationship was established, the meetings became more formal.

FSO described intel requirements to collect or gave intel updates from adjacent units. The XO touched on maintenance or admin issues. And I would FRAG tasks for the next day or coming weeks, or hand out and explain new guidance. Early in the deployment, we would often discuss rules of engagement, fundamentals of counterinsurgency and the reasons behind various frictions (Why is there limited electricity? How does the Iraqi ration card system work? Who exactly is in charge of what function at the National Police?) to ensure each patrol leader was armed with as much knowledge as possible. These meetings lasted anywhere from 15–55 minutes. They ensured that everyone was on the same page for the next 24–96 hours of operations.

Platoon Focus

Platoons must own daily operations and have a sense of ownership for their area. I provided my platoons guidance so they would understand what was expected for daily patrols (duration, method of execution, focus, specific contingencies) and then FRAGO'd them a series of tasks to execute during the week. Otherwise, the platoon leader had complete discretion for the execution of his patrols. Individual patrol leaders were expected to make decisions.

We patrolled 24/7. Patrol size and composition often changed, based on combat power available or the enemy threat. At one point, we patrolled with four vehicles (half a platoon) for six-hour shifts. At another point, we would stage an entire platoon forward, with half the platoon in patrol base at the Iraqi army checkpoint, switching out with



Soldiers of Company B—from left, SSgt. Bobby Magee, Capt. Keirse and SSgt. Jason Kennedy—enjoy a late-night meal prepared for them by a supportive local citizen.



Above and below, two views from the cabs of Humvees on patrol in Rashid, a predominately Sunni area of southern Baghdad. Capt. Keirsey varied the patrols in Rashid; each had a purpose, and the driving was combined with dismounted elements, overwatch elements, deception operations and other techniques to destabilize observers.



the patrolling half at four-hour intervals over an eight-hour patrol. When the enemy threat was greatest, battalion re-sourced the company with seven platoons, and we had entire platoons patrolling at six-hour, overlapping intervals.

A patrol must never be: “Drive around and wait for something to happen.” Patrols need a purpose, but never busy-work. Additionally, the tactics for a patrol should destabilize an observer. A “drive around” patrol is predictable and easy to attack. Combine driving with dismounted elements, overt and covert overwatch elements, deception operations, satellite patrols and other such techniques. Put your platoon leaders in charge of creating effective patrol techniques. Arm them with a playbook of methods, so when the patrol goes long they can rely on a rehearsed playbook and not cede initiative to the enemy. Patrolling techniques are critical; have PLs war-game them with you during the nightly huddle.

Give platoons a framework for success—a milestone to

reach—for a given (short) period of time. Rare is the platoon leader whom you can task to “go establish an informant network that will defeat all the IEDs and deny the insurgents safe haven.” Instead, break the goal into achievable tasks and get after it. I knew we needed a robust informant network; we achieved this by charging platoons with talking to every household in the area. This effort was tracked by the company FSO. Through talking to every household in the area, using a specific format and answering specific questions, platoons developed an understanding of who was more helpful to us than others. If you talk to 100 people, about 15 will tell you something useful, and maybe three will become dependable informants. But in the process of talking to 100 people, you have begun to establish a relationship with every one of them. Even more importantly, the U.S. Soldier involved has gained a much deeper understanding of his area. So, to sum it up, the milestone to reach for a particular platoon for a week would be: “Conduct engagements on these 100 households.” (More later on how we would assign and track that operation.)

To further establish a framework for the platoons to conduct daily operations, the company established common graphics and terms. The Iraqi addresses in our area were haphazard and not understood by the populace. We kept their street numbering system, but we redivided the neighborhood into zones and labeled each

house with our own graphic control measures. This enabled relieving platoons to talk easily to each other about individuals they visited or about who was an informant.

As the deployment progressed, I put more and more responsibility on platoon leaders. I assigned a platoon leader to conduct daily synchronizations with the Iraqi army in our area. I would still attend targeting meetings and work with their leadership, but the Iraqi army synched daily operations with a specific PL. I assigned daily operations of the Iraqi security volunteers (ISV) to another PL. These two PLs—more so the ISV synch—would spend hours daily solving small problems and building relationships with their counterparts. I also assigned a platoon leader to inspect and ensure daily functioning of various projects and municipality efforts; unfortunately, due to attachment/detachment task-org changes, we never got very far in making this a platoon effort, and the FSNCO eventually became a very effective synch of services.



An Iraqi boy who was injured in an al Qaeda mortar attack is picked up from the combat support hospital by soldiers of First Platoon, Company B.

Platoons and patrols are in sector for a long time. Limit patrols to no more than eight hours (preferably six hours), so guys stay focused and alert. Have patrols take ownership of what occurs during their patrol (e.g., You found a little girl requiring follow-up medical checks? Great! She is your responsibility to check weekly.). And ensure patrols understand that what they do during their “shifts” directly affects the security of all follow-on shifts. Feed the patrols as much to do as you can, without creating busywork; better they have more objectives than they can feasibly accomplish than nothing to do. And the sooner that platoons start generating their own objectives (because you’ve powered down ownership of the mission) the better.

Deception Operations

Platoons want something to focus on. You want the enemy destabilized. When you’ve got no other overarching objectives, or just to shake things up, put some organizational energy into operations that keep your enemy off balance. Challenge your squad leaders’ ingenuity. Deviations from the norm keep that guy who is watching your patrols nervous and may disrupt an attack, or they may keep the enemy from focusing on winning the population. You can attach weirdo stuff to your already weirdo vehicles; have patrols pay particular attention to some otherwise uninteresting landmark; rapidly move to and search an abandoned lot for no reason; mass forces in unusual places; leave weird stuff in weird places—the list of deception operations is endless. Break up the pattern. Disrupt the observers. And keep your interpreters in the dark.

Define the Enemy

I broke down the complex enemy/insurgent situation into common terms and an understanding that may have oversimplified things, but it allowed my guys to grasp the intri-

cacies without confusing anybody. I hope. All terms are my own.

We had a whole bunch of insurgents. But we only had a hard-core small minority that we had to detain or kill. And it was in our best interest to get the remainder to become useful citizens.

The hard-core minority (call them al Qaeda) were irreconcilable, often imports to the area, focused on establishing strict sharia law and actively fighting the government throughout Iraq. This was a small group, feared by the locals and often not from the neighborhood. They had money, access to IEDs and weapons, and were

very idealistic (in a bad way). These guys had to go—kill, detain or deny safe haven.

A larger group (call them mujahideen) were religiously motivated (they liked the ideals of sharia law), from the area, focused on defending the area from perceived enemies (JAM, JAM-complicit National Police, Iranians) and actively fought perceived enemies encroaching into the neighborhood. This group got money and access to IEDs and weapons from al Qaeda. They were linked to al Qaeda because there was, in their minds, no alternative. Al Qaeda scared them, but they fought alongside them for the money and to reach the common end of protecting Sunnis. For a lot of reasons, these guys were critical to success in the counterinsurgency. Chiefly, their leaders had the religious and tribal cachet to sway their entire loose confederation one way or the other. These guys could either be our (and the Iraqi government’s) enemies or friends. We could not find and detain all these guys without seriously persecuting the entire neighborhood. So these guys had to be engaged, convinced of an alternative to extremism and brought alongside our efforts.

A similarly sized group (hard to judge the size) were what I called criminals. Granted, the circumstances of our neighborhood created a fecund environment for criminality. Lack of jobs, perceived government persecution, poor services and ghettoization all contributed to a disenfranchised male youth. Young men could choose to become complicit with terrorist activities for money, commit crimes for money or do nothing for no money. They had few other viable options. Criminals were a harder animal to deal with than were the Muj. You do not want to co-opt known criminals to your cause without some serious rehabilitation or perceived rehab. Otherwise, your efforts get tainted by scumbags. Furthermore, we did not want to begin targeting common criminals and thugs because we did not have the ability to keep all those guys in the detainee system. These folks were

Local National Casualty Triage

Set this framework for your patrols early on, so they know what to do. Ours was:

Life, limb or eyesight goes to the CSH. Take family members and get them a visitor's pass. Keep their contact info and have the CSH call you when the patient is released. If possible, deliver the patient back to the family or escort them to pickup.

Needs immediate attention but not life, limb or eyesight. Have the family go with the Iraqi army to the nearest Iraqi hospital. This was important. Locals would not travel the road to the hospital without escort because they believed sectarian checkpoints would kill or detain them. Perception is reality. The IA curried a lot of favor escorting folks to the hospital, and we didn't have the combat power to do it.

Less than immediate attention. Have the locals get an appointment at the hospital and arrange IA escort, or refer them to a local clinic or doctor who could meet their needs. It goes without saying that you should task patrols to do follow-ups with the family and the patient.

dealt with on a case-by-case basis and, whenever possible, shifted to the Iraqi army as targets. (The Iraqi police were never viable in our area due to a VBIED decimating their HQ and having zero freedom of movement.)

Beyond these "enemy" groups, we had a large population just waiting to be co-opted by whoever offered hope for the future and structure for life—it could be al Qaeda or us. I did not focus on JAM or their special groups, as we were in a predominantly Sunni area.

Win Through the Population

Everyone knows that insurgencies can exist only within a given population and that the preferred way to get rid of the insurgency is for that population to deny it safe haven. If you cannot convince the population to get rid of or stop growing an insurgency, you will never win. We looked at our little area, made some assumptions about the insurgency we were fighting and sought to change those assumptions in our favor.

I assumed that the insurgency thrived in our area for three chief reasons: the population believed that *only* the insurgents could or would protect them; the population believed that the insurgents could not be defeated by CF or ISF; and the population believed the Iraqi government would never provide them with what they needed to survive. We had to counter these perceptions. We had to get the folks of the neighborhood talking openly about how the CF, ISF and IG were working to make their area better. We had to get the folks of the neighborhood counseling their kids not to raise arms against security forces. We had to get folks willing to deny al Qaeda safe haven. We couldn't do it; only they could.

Relations with the People—Some Pointers

Get your patrols talking to people as much as possible. Your Soldiers will naturally pick up Arabic phrases that en-

dear them to receptive folks. Make sure your men understand that people are only comfortable around Soldiers when they perceive them as disciplined. Nobody wants to see face masks or bandannas on a professional Soldier. They don't want to see your guys standing around outside a girls' school, smoking. They don't want to see your guys ogling attractive women. Fifty percent of the population speaks some sort of conversational English, and they know when your guys are using foul language or speaking about women. They know when you make disparaging comments. They can see a sideways "Well, what do you want me to do about it?" sarcastic glance from a patrol leader when asked a difficult question. Simple actions from your patrols will either make or break your relationship with the people.

So make it count. Respect the women. To a fault. In most circumstances, you don't need to search a house or question a household of just women. Wait until the man comes home. People will spread malicious rumors that you can never counteract if you make a habit of entering homes occupied solely by women. Don't search women unless you are, in fact, a woman. And don't have a bunch of guys stand around watching if you do have a woman searching women. And make sure your designated female woman searcher takes off her helmet so folks know she actually is a woman.

When talking to someone in his or her house, I want the patrol leader (or whoever's talking—if you have a sergeant better at talking to folks than the lieutenant is, delegate to the guy who has the talent) to take off his helmet and eye protection. Sit down. Accept the water, tea or whatever is offered. Use Arabic. Be respectful. However, the other Soldiers on patrol do not lounge around and tea-it-up as well. They pull security. They are not rude or gruff, but they stay in uniform and respectfully do their jobs. Listen to problems with sincerity, but don't make promises about things you can't change. People will see you as a representative of the government and will accord you powers you don't possess.

Arm yourself and your patrols with facts to respond to the usual questions. For example (without going into too much detail and with the understanding that all answers are AO-specific), a common question would be, "Why don't you release all the detainees?" We were ready with an answer: "The detainees we take are the enemies of the people. Here is a list, photographs and circumstances for every person my unit has ever detained. As you can see, the evidence against these guys is pretty concrete. Would you like this guy released? Here are some guys we captured putting IEDs in the ground. Here are some guys that neighbors of yours—in secret because they fear for their lives—identified in sworn statements to be murderers, and here are the folks they are alleged to have murdered. Of course, each of these cases is being reviewed, and if you would like to attest to the innocence of any detainee, I can arrange to personally investigate his circumstances of capture and get back to you. I can attest to the safety of every person in U.S. custody. With some of these guys, I hope that they come out of whatever punishment deemed necessary by the courts and become contributing members of society," etc.



Having been treated at the combat support hospital and released, an Iraqi boy is reunited with his grateful mother.

tion, or you could utilize the oral culture to your advantage. Figure out your spheres of influence. Have prominent folks' numbers in your cell phone. When something happens, immediately have your interpreter broadcast a command message of the facts on a vehicle PA (public-address system). If you take fire or are hit by an IED, describe the event. Otherwise, the event will be twisted by your enemy into whatever they want. Call your spheres of influence daily and explain what is going on, and on patrols have your guys defeat rumors with facts.

Acknowledging the oral culture is grade-school level. Defeating rumors with facts is high school. College level is utilizing the rumor culture to get your facts out. Grad school is using rumors to destabilize your enemy and erode his support network.

This is the first half of Jim's thought-provoking reflections that are posted in the CC forum. Next month, the rest of his reflections will be published here. Jim's demonstrated willingness to reflect upon his experiences, learn from them and share them with his fellow commanders is the mark of a professional. We are all indebted to him and to other leaders who share what they are doing and learning. By learning from each other's experiences, we advance the Army's combat effectiveness. If you have company-command experiences to share, log in to your professional forum, <http://CC.army.mil>, and connect with like-minded leaders. If you are not a member, send your feedback and ideas to peter.kilner@us.army.mil.

Often, when shown who has actually been detained by your unit and presented with the evidence, the questioner will see that you are detaining the right guys (as long as you are using precision in your detentions) and will gain confidence in your operations and fairness. Plus, he may just be asking so he can tell "so-and-so" that he went and asked the Americans, thus fulfilling an obligation.

Another common plea we heard was, "Please build us a hospital. Yarmook hospital is sectarian, and we will get killed if we go there." Our response was, "I recognize your concerns—everybody needs medical care. My superiors (COL X) have a plan to build a hospital for this area, but we need to be realistic in the short term. Hospitals take millions of dollars and years to build, and then you need to staff the building with the specialists and doctors. In the short term, we are increasing the capability of Dr. X's clinic, to give it trauma capability and an ambulance to get you to a full-fledged hospital. Here is a handout with all of the local clinics, their phone numbers, hours and what they can treat—that's a pretty significant amount of coverage. And, as we have demonstrated in the past, if a local is in danger of losing life, limb or eyesight, Coalition forces will rush them to Ibn Sina (CSH) in the Green Zone, as we did for X's little girl and Y's grandmother. Additionally, the Iraqi army will escort families to Yarmook for non-life-threatening cases and ensure their safety at that location. Iraqi army LTC Z has committed to this, and they always have an ambulance on standby. You may have heard about how the IA helped the families of so-and-so under such circumstances."

Controlling Rumors/Utilizing Rumors

In my area of Iraq, information moved orally. Rumors ruled the day. You could either be the victim of misinforma-