



# CompanyCommand

## Building Combat-Ready Teams



**To:** Company Commanders

**From:** Company Commanders

## When Is Small Too Small?

Companies, platoons and even squads are often deployed alone to remote combat outposts as we wage the counterinsurgency fight. This tactic increases our interaction with local nationals and thus helps us to separate the enemy from the populace. But have we gone

too far? Are we stretching ourselves so thin in our efforts to secure remote locations that we are accepting too much risk? Are we presenting the enemy with achievable targets? Listen in as experienced company-level leaders talk about their views on the topic.

### Niel Smith

**B/2-37 Armor**

In general, no. Remember, METT-TC [Mission, Enemy, Terrain, Troops, Time, Civilians] rules. If you're in a Phase III/high Phase II insurgency, placing squads alone on the battlefield isn't the smartest option. If you're in low Phase II or Phase I, you can accept more risk. As long as you're not unthinking and dogmatic, there is little risk as you describe. I successfully managed a platoon combat outpost (COP) in Tal Afar subordinate to my company COP for two months until we handed it over to the Iraqis.

Moving to forward operating bases and commuting to work was the single biggest tactical failure of the war—we ceded massive territory to the insurgents and criminals. I challenge anyone to show me an insurgency where operating in and among the population hurt the counterinsurgent force. Obviously, using the host-nation forces is best. If a

platoon is backed by local forces of decent caliber, platoon COPs become very possible. At this point in either war, we shouldn't be going it alone, so our platoon leaders certainly should be out there with local forces.

You can't gain the population's support if you can't protect them 24/7, and without the population's support, the enemy can't operate effectively. The key for any COP is the ability to defend itself and accomplish its objectives. The higher element needs to have a ready quick reaction force that can use multiple routes to relieve the unit if it's in trouble. Again, METT-TC dictates what is acceptable risk and force size.

### Chanda Mofu

**B & HHC/1-6 Infantry**

We have not gone too far in embedding combat power and enablers and syncing with local governments in both Iraq and Afghanistan. I wouldn't say that embedding with the populace was the single success story for OIF (plenty of other factors cycle in as well), but it has helped move us in the right direction. It was something we had to do. It is working, helps paint a better intelligence picture and certainly has benefitted our nonlethal operations as well.

*Soldiers of Company C, 1-66 Armor, stage vehicles in Combat Outpost (COP) 727 in preparation for movement. The outpost has since been handed over to the Iraqi National Police.*



Capt. Roman Izzo



Lt. Col. Peter Kilner

*This company-sized combat outpost was seized from a leader of al Qaeda in Iraq.*

But considering the number of platoon and company outposts, the unknown growth of Foreign Fighters in Afghanistan, the long lag time to get fixed-wing or rotary-wing support, and the lengthy (to include predictable) logistical tail to properly support them—yes, there may be a problem. Companies and platoons are stretched thin, even though they are augmented with local forces. It will be interesting to see what kind of growth and strategy the enemy will bring in the spring.

#### **Brian Waters**

##### **C/62nd Engineer Combat Battalion (Heavy)**

As Niel states, it's all METT-TC. I think it's hard to understand the differences between COPs in Iraq versus in Afghanistan. Having served in Baghdad where battalion-sized FOBs [forward operating bases] were no more than 10 miles from the next battalion-sized FOB, there is always a quick reaction force close by.

In Afghanistan, there are few bases that are larger than platoon size, and they are all at least 10 miles from the nearest base. This does get us embedded with the population, but it comes at the cost of flexibility, especially at COPs that are air-locked in the mountains. By spreading out, each platoon has a limited ability to react, maneuver and patrol as they must leave some force on the COP for defense, which in a sense defeats the purpose of getting out into the community.

The smaller COPs are also targets for a larger force to attempt to overrun, greatly increasing the need for a well-planned defense.

#### **Roman Izzo**

##### **C/1-66 Armor**

A company-sized element should not be required to man more than one combat-outpost-type location at a time. It is

safe to assume that a platoon will be dedicated to securing the site at all times—when this is a 24-hour requirement, it pulls down a significant amount of combat power.

My company team currently mans a COP and a joint security station (JSS), and that limits the number of patrols I can conduct daily. Interestingly, a reevaluation of the fighting positions we inherited from the previous unit decreased our security requirements from four to three rooftop positions, enabling a platoon to secure the COP and still be combat-ready after a 24-hour shift. The staff sections that calculate troop-to-task are notoriously bad about forgetting that people need sleep and that generally, after a rotation on COP security, the element in question needs five to eight hours to recover before being mission-capable.

A COP should not be secured by less than a platoon at any time. If you're paying the one-platoon security bill, at least two to three other platoons should be staging from that location, so a deliberate COP must be at the company level.

#### **Darren Fowler**

##### **D/2-12 Cavalry**

I agree. The JSS/COP is the single best strategy employed in Iraq to turn the public's opinion in COIN.

My experience is twofold. First, nothing less than a company should be tasked to man a JSS.

Roman hit this point home with the security manning requirement. I had the Iraqi army put a man in each guard position. Why? This allowed an approximately 20-man platoon to secure the JSS in a 24-hour period. But it also allowed the Iraqi army to talk to the population as they walked by or wanted to "relay" some information.

It takes a strong effort to ensure stability in a neighborhood. Second, the local security force must be perceived as taking the lead. I had the MiTT [military training team] live with me out at my JSS, and we supported the local security



force's efforts by playing the supporting role in operations.

*Joint security stations* means *joint*—joint command posts, joint motor pools, joint operations, joint meetings and joint efforts in zone. You have to share information and intelligence in order to allow yourself and your partnered unit to be seen as one effort.

Finally, the JSS/COP *must* be accessible to the population, either through walk-ins or a tip line. The population feels as though their voices are heard. Bring in the neighborhood reps to sit down at these meetings, and reinforce their remarks at the neighborhood advisory council meetings!

I soon discovered that the JSS life was much more rewarding and enjoyable than the FOB life. By putting effort into the quality of life at the JSS, the Soldier's morale will stay high.

### **Erik Peterson**

**C/2-12 Cavalry**

I concur that the minimum COP size should be company level, at least in Iraq. As a commander, I found the smaller the force size, the less time I wanted them to remain in sector. Over the long term, there are more guns available for security in a company, but the bigger benefit is a company headquarters with additional assets and experience to deal with situations. This allows exploitation of the benefits of living forward in sector.

I found, as an ex-JSS/COP commander, that I had to rethink what a JSS/COP was. A JSS/COP is an institution as much as a safe facility and has multiple functions with the local population. This led to my biggest enabler: increased

intelligence. I strongly believe as a "commuter" I only had a 10 percent read of what I had as a "resident." I honestly had more intelligence than I could handle at the company level and had to figure out new systems to analyze the data. The cost was that I had to be an active member of the community, building relationships and being able to produce when I said I could. This was a constantly ongoing process and a lot of work. The JSS/COP is a tool in the COIN fight, not the end state.

If we think about this through the lens of "elements of combat power," a company outpost provides both increased leadership through better command and control and better information through better intelligence vetting. Ultimately, you end up with a smaller amount of troops available, but you are smarter about where you send them. This, I would argue, actually limits the ability of enemy targeting. Having commanded both on an FOB and a JSS/COP, I definitely would not want to go back to the old days of living on the super FOBs.

### **John McFarlin**

**HHT/2-9 Cavalry**

As a commander of a squadron headquarters at a JSS, my experience is different from my brothers' at truly austere COPs, but many problem sets are the same. I do not think that the tactical decision to COP or JSS stretches us too thin security-wise. However, I'm not pulling security. I'm lucky to be able to rely on a brother unit colocated for security.

Where the stretching occurs in my case—and it's come up in conversations with my brothers on the line—is in facili-



*A UH-60 Black Hawk makes an approach into OP Hatchet in Afghanistan.*

Capt. Brian Waters

ties maintenance and sustainment activities, the sort of stuff that's handled by contractors on robust FOBs and camps. Infrastructure and logistics off the FOB are difficult. Combat power diminishes due to undeveloped facilities and lower quality of life, or risk is ultimately assumed due to lack of technical knowledge vis-a-vis plumbing, sewer, carpentry, and especially electrical repairs and construction.

Recently—as commanders in Baghdad know—shortfalls in electrical work in JSSs and COPs were the focus, as shower trailers were banned from use until inspected by an engineer electrician. Besides electrocution, electrical fires at JSSs are also a constant present danger and require vigilance and diligent inspection that saps leaders' time—breakers, wire, light ballasts, daisy-chained power strips, you name it.

I think it's safe to say that it's harder to influence the population if you're ill-rested, unwashed or dealing with a pond of human waste flooding your staging area, but it happens. And a fatality or loss of a JSS to fire could be more effective in reducing combat power than a successful attack. SSG Perry's recent letter to *Stars and Stripes* discussing the issue of living conditions at COP Callahan, while a bit dramatic, does bring to light the fact that quality of life is a pressing matter and a requirement to maximize combat power. Just as MRAPs, M240Bs, FOO [Field Ordering Officer] money and Sons of Iraq payroll are combat multipliers, the generator, the shower trailer, the phone/Internet system, the breaker box and the humble fluorescent light ballast make a difference.

Reliance on local-national contractors occasionally works adequately, but rarely well, and sometimes so poorly as to be as much a distraction as a benefit. I've dealt with contractors so infuriating that I was sure that the enemy had set them up to bid the contract low and win it so they could be a general pain in the behind. U.S. contractors are not currently postured to forward-deploy support, even to robust off-the-FOB sites, so "to standard" contractor support is effectively unavailable. Touching on electrical support, as it's been a recent hot topic, if a unit deployed to a COP has a "farm boy" who knows his way around wire gauges and phases and knows the difference between neutral and ground and such, that's often about as good as it gets. I've been lucky to have a maintenance team colocated to see to it, and some recent attention from the engineer brigade.

*The sole mechanic at a company-sized combat outpost works in austere conditions.*

Building materials available are inadequate to the task—"broke on installation" is the norm. I asked friends of mine to send door hardware, and thankfully I received it.

So, my read is that the main threat posed by the decision to COP or JSS the force isn't posed by enemy direct action; it comes from inadequate logistical resourcing of a sound tactical choice. Any reply that implies that austerity is the order of the day isn't realistic more than five years into OIF, and for, let's just say, "heavily experienced" Soldiers.

To answer the question posed: "When is small too small?" My answer is: "When the unit cannot be sustained logistically, then that's too small." Company/troop/battery-size is about the rough edge of that threshold, in my opinion.

### **Kevin Green**

#### **Combat Adviser, Afghanistan**

Just got to Afghanistan. I don't know the answer, but we are providing the enemy with ample opportunity to attack us as we move into smaller outposts. We've always desired a three-to-one ratio in a fight, but in this kind of fight even a three-to-one ratio isn't enough, as the insurgents can cause catastrophic damage to troops and equipment with one person. As I said, I don't know the answer, but in some of my COIN readings I see units that lived among the Afghan people early on and lost 19 troops in a short time. It got better, but how much exposure is too much?

### **Eric Balough**

#### **HHC/1-16 Infantry**

I've done a little of both in Iraq and Afghanistan, and both times as an adviser. Niel hit the nail on the head with METT-TC. I know it is the typical cliché answer to everything, but it's true.



Lt. Col. Peter Kilner





*The exterior of Combat Outpost 727 during a sandstorm.*

**Mission.** Consider what your mission is first. Does sending small elements as OPs support my overall mission?

**Enemy.** What is the size of the potential enemy that I face or that my PLs or squad leaders face? What is the enemy's most dangerous option? (Don't ignore the reports that up to 700 Talib could be in an area. You might just find them, and then what?)

**Time.** Is this patrol going outside of the range of my mortars or other indirect-fire assets? What is the availability and maximum arrival time of close air support and medevac? If those things are not as responsive (as in western Afghanistan), how fast can I reinforce my position or secure their exfiltration route? How long will they be there—24, 48, 96 hours? Or permanently? If it's a permanent thing, then the logistical piece that John talks about is incredibly important and requires additional planning.

**Terrain.** If this patrol is going to have good observation and fields of fire, can I assume a little more risk in pushing them out there? What are their primary and alternate routes back if they get overwhelmed? What are my primary and alternate routes to reinforce them?

**Troops.** Can I dedicate enough troops to act as a reserve, conduct patrols and maintain my own security? Should I send three OPs out when two or even one might do?

**Civilian considerations.** Living among the population is the best way to gain their trust, and I think we'd all agree with that at this point. However, it also increases exposure. Again, it's that judgment call that you have to make on the ground to determine whether or not that exposure satisfies your overall mission requirements. Maybe you can leverage other assets (such as local troops, civil affairs or psyops) to help manage that exposure.

Regardless of duration of the mission, an often-overlooked consideration is "commo." This is especially important in Afghanistan. Does the COP have a good plan for alternative means of communication? Do they have enough batteries, fuel and cryptographic keys to support the operation?

The bottom line is that OPs down to squad and even team size can be adequate for certain things as long as you plan for the tactical considerations surrounding their employment. If you think that a patrol may be left hanging in the breeze, reconsider your options because that element may be too small.

### Christopher Nunn

A & HHC/2-87 Infantry

I have to agree that in general, no, we have not spread ourselves too thin. However, as Niel said, it is all METT-TC dependent. I don't believe that it is possible for a company team to effectively man more than one COP at a time, though. To me, the three most important things to consider are the enemy situation, the friendly situation and how both interplay with the civilians. I can't really talk about Iraq, so this is mainly Afghanistan-focused.

Depending on where you are, the enemy may not be able to mass forces and therefore can only conduct some form of harassment attack. However, if you build a COP astride an enemy infiltration route close to a sanctuary area, you might want to refresh on the whole "conduct a defense" thing. The enemy's not dumb and looks for weaknesses—such as an incomplete defense. The enemy probably won't attack FOBs—although I know of one that's been taken under direct fire several times—but a COP is smaller and presents an easier target. If they can conduct a relatively successful attack, that is a huge success for the enemy.

Which leads me to the friendly situation—*too small* basically equates to *unable to support themselves until help arrives*. Much the same as an obstacle plan (if it's not covered by fire, it's a weakness in the defense), COPs have to be fully integrated into the operational plan of the company. A platoon with enablers—e.g. mortars, TOWs/Javelins, heavy weapons, artillery support—will generally be able to defend themselves for a long time, especially if they have continued to improve their defenses. The most dangerous time is while you are building the COP. Ultimately you have to decide how to incorporate the COP into your operations. To me, when the COP was attacked, its mission was to retain the COP and fix the enemy so that the rest of the company could attack the enemy with all available assets we could bring to bear. That may not be an option or the preferred course of action in certain cases, but an integrated operational plan needs to be fleshed out.

## Robert Ritz

### C/1-9 Cavalry

What about temporary outposts? Currently, I am stationed at a two-cavalry-troop outpost on the Iranian border tasked with partnering with the Iraqi Department of Border Enforcement to stem the flow of lethal accelerants coming in from Iran. We are more than 90 kilometers from our squadron headquarters and have to balance security with the unpredictability of the mission, but it still leaves us open to all sorts of dangers. The nearest ground quick reaction force is 60 kilometers away and not in my squadron, so I have to deal with cross-unit coordination, as well, if something happens. Also, due to the marshlands, we are canalized on many of the roads we can use, and it can take up to three hours just to move 20 kilometers.

Do I think I'm spread thin? Yes. Do I think I'm effective? More so than having to commute 90 kilometers to get to work every day. We balance risks with our effectiveness as

*The view from a rooftop inside a company-sized combat outpost south of Baghdad.*



Lt. Col. Peter Kilner

How these both interact with civilians is where it all ties in. Obviously we build COPs to be among the population, but you need to think through the impact of changes in the enemy and friendly situations. The enemy is going to get IO points just by attacking the COP, but if you cause significant casualties to the enemy, word of mouth will give you the IO victory because you are increasing the perception of security. But if you don't perform that well, the perception of security is going to go down.

Bottom line: Every area of operation is different, but COPs, if properly integrated into your operational plan, can enhance your ability to project power into your AO more comprehensively and therefore increase the security of the COP. Whatever the size, the COP has to be able to support itself, and it has to be integrated into the plan.

a unit. *Safer* does not always mean *mission accomplishment*. Besides, like my SF brothers keep telling me, a shared hardship with the people will help bond them to you, and a shared vision on both sides enables greater effectiveness. And no one can deny that the men of Apache and Crazy Troop are effective in their missions.

## James Bithorn

### A/1-506 Infantry

The purpose of a COP needs to be clearly defined before its emplacement so that the troop-to-task ratio can be properly aligned with its purpose. The trend in Afghanistan today is that COPs are emplaced with either the intent of conducting security operations or more along the lines of governance and development.



*Soldiers assemble at a squad-sized battle position south of Baghdad.*



Lt. Col. Peter Kilmer

A platoon can easily become overwhelmed when guidance is not clearly expressed by leadership. In a COIN environment, we often assign several key tasks, all of which align with several lines of operation to spread our influence in the economy-of-force fight. We, as commanders, must be extremely careful with this, as our eager platoon leaders will attempt to accomplish every last task assigned to them, and they often lose sight of the basic tactics of running base-defense operations.

I currently own two COPs, with each platoon partnered with a company of local forces with whom they live. I also refuse to allow my company command and control to stay centralized; I force the rotation of my top four leaders through each COP on a regular basis. This way, a platoon leader does not end up becoming overwhelmed with battle tracking, base defense and conducting day-to-day operations in accordance with his commander's intent. Patrol bases and temporary outposts provide an ability to maneuver and affect certain areas we never could if we allowed ourselves to be roped in by the constraints of a permanent structure to live/operate out of.

Now as I stated earlier, there are several reasons for emplacing a COP; however, I firmly believe that if you severely limit that platoon's ability to patrol and conduct operations outside of said patrol base/COP, you are setting that element up for failure. Above all else, the basic doctrine of base-defense operations *cannot* be ignored. A HESCO wall and a final protective fire do not equal a good base-defense operation plan. Terrain is number one, followed by well-developed engagement areas, canalizing wire, etc. I feel that as an army, we have gotten extremely far from this and have accepted a quickly emplaced HESCO perimeter as proper security. Let's not fool ourselves. Pay attention to the doctrine we've been taught, remembering that it all still applies in some form in the contemporary operating environment.

Bottom line: One to two platoon COPs per rifle company is feasible if done for the right reasons, properly partnered

with local forces and planned as a proper platoon/company defense. Remember that a graphic symbol on a map does not always reflect reality!

*As with so many issues confronting company-level leaders, there is no "right" answer to this question. Darren Fowler concluded this particular discussion by noting the presence of three of the COIN paradoxes in this discussion: "Sometimes the more you protect your force, the less secure you may be"; "Sometimes the more force is used, the less effective it is"; and "If a tactic works this week, it might not work next week; if it works in this province, it might not work in the next." If you are a currently commissioned past, present or future company commander who wants to participate in this discussion and others like it, we invite you to join us at <http://CC.army.mil>.*

