



CompanyCommand

Building Combat-Ready Teams



To: Company Commanders
From: Company Commanders

Lessons from Task Force Currahee

Company commanders from Task Force Currahee—4th Brigade, 101st Airborne Division (Air Assault)—share some of their hard-earned lessons learned and insights gained from their experience in Afghanistan,

March 2008–March 2009. “We see this process of sharing our knowledge as an integral part of the profession—continuously learning and adapting in order to be the most effective leaders that we can be.”

Dave Lamborn
A/2-506 Infantry

The primary objective of counterinsurgency is to be in control of the population, which includes protecting the people. If the enemy is able to kill or credibly threaten to kill anyone who supports the government, then you will not be able to win the people's support. Most of this hard work will be in the form of reconnaissance and security patrols throughout your AO. Conduct patrols, share risks and maintain contact to obtain the intelligence to drive future operations and to reinforce connections with the people. Ultimately, securing the active support of the population will end the insurgency.

Intelligence is critical to conducting a counterinsurgency. However, if you continue to gather census data, do R&S patrols, set up observation posts, listen to SIGINT and use UAVs but don't have smart people analyzing the intelligence, then it will do you no good. You simply must have a company-level intel team that is crunching this data and

constantly thinking about how to separate the enemy from the population and/or bring the population closer to the government. Good analysis will help you identify who the bad people or groups are and what sort of projects or actions will have the most positive impact on the population.

David Conner
B/2-506 Infantry

Know the culture of the area you are responsible for, and understand that it may be completely different from that of your brother commanders. Ask yourself questions such as: Who is really in charge? Who are the real power players? Where are the real sources of conflict between the people in your area? What do they value? Take some time to figure this out. You can then use this information to shape your themes, messages and operations to meet your end state much more effectively.

We were trying to get a local government center built. Everyone seemed to want it, and it was consistent with the commander's intent along the government line of operation. It took us a while to figure out what the problem was, but we determined it to be one elder who worked behind the scenes to undermine our efforts. We needed to engage him directly, figure out what he valued and convince him—through our Afghan partners—why it was in his interest to support the government center. He had many ties to Pakistan and was concerned that supporting an Afghan district center would jeopardize his business dealings across the border. We laid out how the government center would eventually anchor a new business center and would insist that the general contractor hire subs from the local villages. This reassured the elder, who then took the risk and supported the project. Do



CPT Dave Lamborn breaks bread with local Afghan leaders. Bringing “the population closer to the government” is essential in counterinsurgency, he says.



CPT David Conner and 1SG Roosevelt Whetstone pause for a moment before continuing inspection of an observation post that overlooks critical avenues of approach from Pakistan.

not assume the people will follow logic based on your values. Before you share your ideas, first try to understand how they view the world.

Mike Eliassen

HHC & C/1-506 Infantry

The Soldiers in our unit who put the time into developing relationships with the locals, NGOs and other players in our operational environment were a large part of our success. Those who did not see the Afghans as humans were generally a hindrance. Develop relationships with the idea that they are going to be lifelong. Our battalion commander knew one of the Afghan National Army colonels we worked with from his tour in 2004–05. This was an excellent professional relationship that set both units up for success.

We used a simple but effective pocket card that explained that our key task was to win the tug-of-war with the Taliban and the people. The GIRoA and the Taliban offer competing visions of the future, and it was our job to help the people move toward the government's. That the majority of the Soldiers in the company could explain this made a huge difference in understanding the long-term goals of the battalion and Coalition forces in Afghanistan.

Our medics—and Soldiers in general—were amazing when it came to treating civilian casualties. What made the difference with the younger Soldiers was the Eagle First Responder course that we had every Soldier complete prior to deploying. What I would add to our program would be a more comprehensive EMT program. This emphasis on medical training will make a difference not just with combat medicine, but with everyday emergency treatment as well. Since the population is the center of gravity in a counterinsurgency, this medical capability greatly increases the likelihood for overall success.

Physical endurance is the key to success in combat, especially in Afghanistan, where the demands of terrain and weather cannot be overstated. The effects of heat and alti-

tude combined made a mockery of normal levels of physical fitness.

As far as professional reading is concerned, Sarah Chayes' *The Punishment of Virtue* and Greg Mortenson's *Three Cups of Tea* are two great, off-the-beaten-path books to read. Our battalion invited Sarah Chayes to talk with the leadership down to the platoon-sergeant and squad-leader levels prior to the deployment, and I firmly believe that hearing other points of view on the way the people view the war made a significant difference in our deployment. Of course, a chapter of doctrine a day is the best form of professional development when nothing else jumps out at you.

James Bithorn

A/1-506 Infantry

My greatest challenge in Afghanistan was balancing lethal and nonlethal targeting. As much as I wanted to focus on governance and economic development, I was consistently drawn back into security, primarily kinetic operations.

Over time, we developed an effective targeting process that included three targeting meetings during the course of a two-week period. The first meeting would include my HUMINT collection team, the platoon leaders and my company intelligence support team. The platoon leaders nominated targets in accordance with the ASCOPE methodology (targeting areas, structures, capabilities, organizations, people and events) within each platoon operating environment. If possible, I would also use this event to gather platoon leaders individually for a 24-hour period to level the playing field in terms of their current understanding of their commander's intent and how they saw their district developing.

The second targeting meeting was focused on lethal targeting and would include my partnered ODA, HCT and ColST. Here we hashed out what the current trends were as well as nominations for feasible, time-sensitive targets.

The third and final targeting meeting was more of an intelligence-sharing session between my ColST, the Afghan National Army and police intelligence sections, the Afghan CID (more police investigators than anything else) and Afghan NDS (the Afghan version of a combined CIA and FBI). We would utilize this session to validate certain HUMINT we had received, help focus and refine the ANSF efforts across the province, or simply maintain an understanding of the "ANSF intelligence picture."

Of course, it was difficult to keep this sort of battle rhythm up across the province, particularly when battalion or brigade missions took precedence. For the sake of continuity, the meetings would occur as regularly as possible, even when I could not be there. The most important meeting to keep consistent was the ANSF one, as it served several purposes, particularly in terms of development.

T. Sean Troyer

HHT/1-61 CAV

The Afghan security forces are the main effort! As such, joint and combined operations are the standard in OEF. Local police, border police and the national army will play a



Sean Troyer says that Afghan border police are the most important force influencing his operating environment.

major role in your mission and will affect your lines of operation. Personally, I believe the ABP are the most important force in the ANSF structure. If you own battlespace that includes a portion of the Pakistan border, I recommend conducting internal ABP immersion training to decrease the amount of smuggling, especially arms and personnel. Also, the local tribes along the border will have a strong sense of ownership and responsibility of the border and, in my case, were personally involved in border disputes. You must gain local/tribal leader buy-in concerning border issues, or you will make no effective progress.

I recommend finding out who at your brigade HQs has staff proponentcy on Afghan security forces (most likely the PMO cell). They can help you understand the big picture and fill you in on any issues that they are aware of in your task force AO. They can also provide manning, equipping and resourcing data that will enable you to more effectively work with and incorporate the Afghan forces into your planning process.

Spencer Wallace

B/1-506 Infantry

Relationships with the people are a prerequisite to successful operations. The desired end state for Giro District

was developing an Afghan National Police platoon to the point where they were capable of executing successful counterinsurgency operations. Given this desired end state, 1st Platoon reevaluated the purpose and intent for operations as well as how to incorporate ANP into every facet of planning, execution and refit during six months at Forward Operating Base Giro. The platoon's leadership constantly focused the ANP on the people's needs as a means to build the trust necessary for COIN. After more than 15 *shuras*, delivering supplies necessary to reopen schools, fixing wells in the local bazaar and patching up the schools' windows, the people of Giro trusted the ANP and understood their commitment to improve the district. At this turning point, the ANP chief began receiving information on the enemy's movements, their intent for Giro and their residences from five separate sources. The culminating event for the police was building a plan based on such intelligence and moving to an objective to kill or capture a key Taliban leader. Along with 1st Platoon, the ANP killed four insurgents and wounded three, including the enemy leader. The results were no further harassing fire on the FOB, reports that the key leader fled to Pakistan for treatment, and the movement of all the shopkeepers in his home village to areas controlled by the ANP. The people trusted the ANP's ability to secure them.

Dan Westergaard

A/4-320 FAR

The most significant challenge I faced, and one I did not appreciate until I was on the ground, was logistically supporting operations in Afghanistan. As a Field Artillery battery commander, I had to get "into the weeds" with logistical support, especially when it came to getting my Soldiers the big bullets they needed to fire their howitzers on a daily basis. On any given day, one of my four firebases would fire several fire missions, often bringing them into critical resupply situations. The amount of time, effort, luck and perseverance that is required to ensure that big-bullet ammo was always ordered and delivered was incredible.

Company Command Glossary of Terms

ABP—Afghan border police.
ANP—Afghan National Police.
ANSF—Afghan national security forces.
AO—Area of operations.
BCT—Brigade combat team.
CAS—Close air support.
COIN—Counterinsurgency.
CoIST—Company intelligence support team.
COP—Combat outpost.
EMT—Emergency medical technician.
FB—Firebase.
FOB—Forward operating base.

FSC—Forward support company.
GIROA—Government of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan.
HCT—Human intelligence collection team.
HUMINT—Human intelligence.
NDS—National Directorate of Security.
ODA—Operational detachment alpha.
OEF—Operation Enduring Freedom.
PMO—Provost marshal's office.
R&S patrols—Reconnaissance and security patrols.
SIGINT—Signals intelligence.
UAV—Unmanned aerial vehicle.

Seven Keys to Success

(1) Make developing your junior leaders a top priority. You will operate independently not only at the company-commander level, but down at the platoon level as well.

(2) Understand the importance of “commander’s intent”; it must be nested from the brigade down to the squad. Understand it, and communicate it through every order and during every visit.

(3) Continuously study the weather, the physical and human terrain, and the enemy. Deep knowledge of these will allow you to “see” and “understand” the situation—and then to act effectively.

(4) Understand the basics in battle drills and physical/mental training. This terrain can break you physically and mentally, so train by executing the basics under physical and mental duress.

(5) Every operation, no matter your branch or specialty, is partnered with the Afghan national security forces. Company commanders will tell you that they had the capacity to partner during each operation at some level and in some manner. Organize your company that way. Accept risk as a commander, and partner with the Afghan forces.

(6) Your presence among your platoon and troops at the remotest of outposts, and your relentless energy in morale building, will maintain the necessary command climate, ethics and human dignity to do the hard right over the easy wrong. Fight for resources to visit your troops.

(7) Remain population-centric and in coordination with the Afghan national security forces, for here you will gain the cultural intelligence needed to help separate the enemy from the people and connect the Afghan government to its people.

Afghanistan is hard and unforgiving, but it is also the best place to be a company commander.

Shelia Matthews

E Co. (FSC), 1-506 Infantry

Echo Company (forward support company) performed its doctrinal mission. We conducted convoys to push and pull all classes of supplies organically without an escort from the line companies, attached cooks and mechanics to each forward location, and maintained fuel, water and ammo points. I learned how important it is to maintain technical expertise, while striving for tactical expertise, focusing on the basics: shoot, move and communicate.

Our technique during engagements with the enemy was to maintain contact until the enemy was dead or withdrew. Truck drivers must be capable drivers and mechanics, but they must also be capable gunners. Moreover, each truck commander must be proficient with all communication systems. The convoy commander must be able to effectively call for fire and communicate with CAS. I recommend that you



The 4th BCT Currahees, 506th Infantry, 101st Airborne Division (Air Assault), operated in Paktia, Paktika, Khost, Ghazni, Logar and Wardak Provinces from March 2008 to March 2009.

mount heavy weapons on maneuver and cargo trucks (we even put a turret and gun on our wrecker), and be prepared to provide security for all soft targets (some convoys secured up to 100 host-nation trucks). We also utilized a 60 mm mortar from one of the maneuver companies during extended convoys for enhanced firepower.

Danny Pedersen

A/4-320 FAR

One major insight is that junior leaders must be trained and prepared to operate within the commander’s intent with little to no supervision. Terrain simply does not allow for commanders to oversee most operations. In other words, your leaders will have to “take the message to Garcia.” As a battery commander, I had four platoons spread across four bases and personnel at two other FOBs. From Bagram Airfield, near Kabul, to FB Lilley in Shkin, Paktika Province, I was responsible for the operations and logistics of 114 personnel. Leaders have to be agile problem solvers. They have to be able to understand the commander’s intent and make decisions within that framework without guidance from their higher HQ. This must be trained down to the squad- and team-leader levels.

Brendan McEvoy

A (Sapper)/4BSTB

Platoon leaders have a great deal more responsibility now than they did 10 years ago. Lieutenants are planning and executing their own missions and finding themselves in extremely challenging situations. When I was coming up, we told lieutenants to be with their Soldiers and to be doing what they were doing. That is fine, but it is not sufficient. Platoon leaders need to know that they have a bigger job than just executing the mission and having fun. They actually have to lead that platoon; in today’s environment, that means a lot more work, including doing things that were previously done by company commanders.

Given the added responsibilities and decentralized na-

ture of the operation, it is critical that commanders very intentionally counsel, mentor and coach their platoon leaders. You will be busy, and this practice will fall by the way-side—unless you make it a priority. However, it is a “pay me now or pay me later” thing because the effectiveness of your company depends on it.

Tom Kilbride

C/1-61 CAV

Train all your leaders to be effective decision makers—to think, decide and act. We must teach our leaders how to think, not what to think. Each situation is different and requires the leader on scene to quickly gather the facts, identify the problem, process the information and determine a course of action. My subordinate leaders often had to step up to the next level of leadership and take charge when someone was injured, killed or simply not present.

We lost a total of seven Soldiers and several Afghan National Army soldiers during the deployment. Dealing with casualties is not something the schoolhouse teaches you; it is a terrible event that can either help build a cohesive company or destroy a company. Your soldiers will be scared and angry, which, in combination, can influence people to do things that will detract from the overall counterinsurgency mission. Your Soldiers must be the epitome of disciplined professionals during these trying times. Reinforce your standards and expectations, and make them live them. Soldiers in a good company will see their way through times like this. They will remember the sacrifices of the fallen and the living, which will strengthen their resolve and commitment to complete the mission in Afghanistan. Never let your Soldiers forget that.

Bruce Roett

A (Distro)/801 Brigade Support Battalion

In terms of the Army “be, know, do” leadership framework, I found that the “be” is particularly important in Afghanistan. Who your Soldiers are—and especially their personal courage and integrity—defines the character of your unit. The seven Army Values start and end with each individual Soldier, regardless of rank. I don’t think there is any gray area or line in between when it comes to character and standards. This is especially important at the smaller combat outposts and firebases. Either standards exist and are enforced, or there are no signs of them. You will arrive by rotary wing and immediately see an orderly U.S. Army outpost, or you will see something directly out of the movie “Apocalypse Now.” It is almost always one or the other.

I recommend doing “what if” sessions with your Soldiers over and over again and for every conceivable situation. What if this happens? What if Jones gets wounded? What if the wrecker breaks down here? Asking these questions at every level of leadership and during every phase of training events will spark some great discussions and will address issues and questions that can be solved in training so that when they happen in combat, it will not be the first time your Soldiers have encountered the problem. “What if” everything to death.



An A/2-506th Soldier befriends a boy during a mission to install a well that provided drinking water to his village.

This article is an excerpt from the Afghan Commander AAR Book, Currahee Edition, which includes contributions from 19 company commanders in the 4th Brigade Combat Team, 101st Airborne Division (Air Assault). We want to thank the contributors along with COL Pete Johnson and LTC Dan Morgan—the BCT commander and S-3—for making a lasting contribution to those who are preparing to deploy to Afghanistan now. Members of the PlatoonLeader (<http://PL.army.mil>) and CompanyCommand (<http://CC.army.mil>) professional forums have access to the complete version in the Pro-Reading section of the online forum.

