



CompanyCommand

Building Combat-Ready Teams



To: Company Commanders
From: Company Commanders

Lessons from Task Force Duke in Afghanistan

Company commanders from the nine battalions that composed Task Force Duke (3rd Brigade Combat Team, 1st Infantry Division) in the summer of 2011 have shared their hard-earned knowledge and experiences in a new *Afghan Commander AAR Book*. Task Force Duke waged a counterinsurgency (COIN) campaign in the eastern

Afghanistan provinces of Khost, Paktya and Ghazni from January to December 2011. Despite their high operational tempo, 43 commanders made time during their deployment to share what they were learning with the company commanders who would follow in their footsteps. This month, we share excerpts from some of the contributors.

CPT Bernard Gardner

C/1-26 Infantry

COP Bowri Tanah, Khost Province

Defining Unit Experience

The toughest situation for the company occurred on 2 September 2011 when two platoons and my TAC faced a complex attack when conducting a joint raid to capture a high-value individual in a congested urban area. A group of children and teenagers had moved close to our inner cordon, and one teenager threw a grenade that exploded 10 feet from me and some of the Soldiers. Five seconds later, another local-national kid ran near one of the vehicles on the outer cordon and threw a grenade into one of the gunner's turrets, and then we received small-arms fire from a cornfield 300 meters away. Six U.S. personnel were wounded, including me, as well as two Afghan border police. My body immediately went into shock after 10 pieces of shrapnel tore into my legs, butt, side and shoulder. There was also one PSG wounded who required urgent evacuation due to blood loss.

This attack removed two key leaders within my company, forcing my company executive officer to assume command back at the combat outpost and one platoon leader to assume command of the company TAC and the two platoons on the ground. A senior squad leader immediately stepped up to fill the role of the wounded PSG and began coordinating the CASEVAC/MEDEVAC operations. The junior leaders on site all had to step up and take charge, executing a counterattack that resulted in the capture of one grenade thrower, while simultaneously conducting CASEVAC/MEDEVAC operations. Both of my two platoon leaders on the ground had only one month of experience as platoon leaders, which put them in an awkward situation of who was senior. Just before I was MEDEVAC-ed, I placed in charge the platoon leader tasked at the decisive operation and ordered him to continue the pursuit and exploitation.

This event was a perfect scenario where a unit had to execute succession of command under fire with multiple platoons. It is important for all Soldiers to understand that they are literally a heartbeat away from taking over their supervisors' duties and responsibilities. Thankfully, there were no KIA and our succession of command was anticipated, understood and rehearsed prior to conducting the mission. The leaders executed flawlessly and maintained our battle rhythm until I resumed command several days later.

CPT Jerry Wood

B/6-4 Cavalry

COP Wilderness, Paktya Province

Building the U.S.-Afghan Team

In everything that you do, you will have an Afghan counterpart (if you want to be successful). Focus your first month or so on building the team. Drink the chai and eat the goat liver kabobs. This will go a long way during your deployment, especially when you are fighting side-by-side with your counterpart. Build the team first—eat “humble pie” up front if you must—and the Afghans will perform well when you need them the most. After you have built the team, assess your counterparts and tailor a “realistic” training plan for your team. The Afghanistan National Army is new, so its NCO corps does yet not have the experience to be the backbone. The officers are the backbone in their Army, so ensure that an Afghan officer is on every mission.

CPT Dan Leard

A/1-26 Infantry

COP Terezayi, Khost Province

Partnering Effectively with the ANSF

Working with ANSF is frustrating and time-consuming. You will need to earn their trust and respect. They will often attempt to make you support them logistically, largely because

CPT Jerry Wood, at Combat Operating Post Wilderness, stresses team-building initially and including one's Afghan counterpart, an Afghan officer, "on every mission."

their own logistics systems are cumbersome. Do not fall into the trap. Small assistance for critical needs that require timely response is acceptable, but know their systems inside and out, and coach them through their own requesting and re-supply procedures. Always reinforce success, and never let failure become a pattern. Teaching Afghans to execute a drill or a procedure is the same as how we teach our Soldiers—muscle memory. Include them in mission pre-briefs and roll calls. Learn their names. How can they feel partnered if their name is “Hey, You”? Never publically criticize or correct; always coach in private. Do not use phrases like, “You are wrong,” “That was horrible,” or “You need to fix this.” Instead, approach it from a coaching perspective: “I know we can do this better.” “Let’s do some more rehearsals on that tomorrow.” Or, “How can we fix this problem?” Ask them for input and solutions. In two tours to Afghanistan—one as an infantry company commander and one as an MiTT leader—I can honestly say that the best solutions and programs I have seen were initiated by Afghan leaders telling me what we needed to do.

CPT Rebecca Doak

527th Military Police Company

FOB Gardez, Paktya Province

Working with Civilian Teammates

What I’ve learned from my coalition teammates is that if we get together for regular meetings to ensure that everyone has the same common operating picture and is working for the same goals, then we have a much more powerful effect on the civilian populace than if we all work on accomplishing our own missions independently.

We each bring a unique skill set to the COIN problem. The Army is very good at security, but there is more to COIN than just the security line of effort, and in many cases our civilian and coalition teammates are absolutely vital. We need the interpreters to translate for us, or else our ability to secure the populace is hamstrung. If you want to build a multimillion-dollar hospital in a village that helped you identify insurgents, the USAID agent is much better at that than any lieutenant who goes through a two-day contracting course. If you want to conduct an investigation into possible corruption at your police station, the

CPT Dan Leard (left) listens to the Terezayi District sub-governor during one of their daily meetings in Khost Province. A civil-affairs team member is seated between them.



battalion’s law-enforcement professionals are perfectly suited for that task. To be successful out here, you have to value each member of the team and what they bring to the fight and then work together to achieve the same end state.

CPT Michael Carrion

C/2-2 Infantry

COP Deh Yak, Ghazni Province

Fitness and Marksmanship

Being in peak physical condition will allow you to handle a lot of the stresses that are put on you, both physically and mentally. I would argue that combat is as mentally draining as it is physically demanding. Being in great shape allows your body to handle stresses that otherwise might require behavioral health care. Marksmanship is also key. If your Soldiers are trained well in marksmanship, you will be able to take advantage of tactical situations that present themselves only a few minutes at a time. For example, when you see an enemy with a weapon, you run up the side of a hill to get a better vantage point and engage the enemy at 400 meters with a single shot to the head. Combat-stress shoots during training will pay dividends in combat.





"To be successful out here," says CPT Rebecca Doak in eastern Afghanistan's Paktya Province, "you have to value each member of the team." Civilian and coalition teammates, she says, are "absolutely vital."

CPT Mark Snowbarger
C/6-4 CAV

Camp Clark, Khost Province

Fitness and Dismounted Maneuver

A high level of physical fitness—which gives you the ability to move in the mountains—is extremely important. If you don't get out of your trucks and move in the mountains, you're going to roll down the road and constantly get shot at. The Afghans like to know where you are, and huge tan vehicles really help them with this. But conducting a dismounted night movement and showing up at first light, dismounted in their village, gives you the initiative.

CPT Dana Eisenman

B/201 Brigade Support Battalion (Field Maintenance Company)

FOB Salerno, Khost and Paktya Provinces

Drivers' Training

When driving 24-ton vehicles on narrow roads across rugged terrain, good drivers' training is essential. If a virtual drivers' training suite is available, take advantage of it. My Soldiers were introduced to the MaxxPro and M-ATV in a virtual trainer long before we were able to train on actual ve-

hicles. It allowed them to get accustomed to the cab of the vehicle and where all the controls are. More importantly, it also allowed them to understand limits of the vehicles without putting themselves or the equipment in danger. If possible, also have them drive in rugged terrain prior to deployment. M-ATVs and MaxxPros may not be readily available, but even an LMTV with shelter will help Soldiers understand what happens to a vehicle with a high center of gravity.

CPT Jason Logan

E/2-2 Infantry (Forward Support Company)

COP Andar, Ghazni Province

Making the Most of RIP/TOA

Emphasize and take full advantage of the handover with the unit you are replacing. I don't think there was any training event more important for preparing my company for our mission than the relief-in-place training we received from CPT Maxwell and his FSC for 3-187 Infantry out of Fort Campbell, Ky. I instructed my company to arrive with open minds and ears. They did, and I found that even my "crusty" NCOs with multiple deployments were able to take away valuable information that helped set us up for success. My distribution platoon benefited the most from the RIP/TOA training because they were immersed in convoy operations. The most valuable aspect of the process was learning the operation, PMCS, and troubleshooting of the new gun trucks (M-ATVs and MaxxPros), communications equipment (Harris radios) and CROWS. Even if a unit is able to get training on this equipment prior to deployment, which I highly suggest, it still will not compare with the quality of hands-on experience your Soldiers can get in their first couple of weeks on the ground by learning from their counterparts who have just done their same jobs on that equipment for the previous year.

CPT Mike Marchetti

B/2-10 Aviation

FOB Salerno, Flying in Khost, Paktya,

Paktika and Ghazni Provinces

Weather, Terrain and Air-Ground Integration

Weather and terrain impact aviation operations on a daily basis. During the summer, passenger movements are restricted due to the warm weather and high elevation of LZs. Commanders would get used to moving a complete



CPT Mark Snowbarger (right) confers with his squadron commander, LTC Mark Borowski, during a patrol. CPT Snowbarger stresses the overall importance of being physically fit.

Glossary of Military Terms

ANSF = Afghan national security force

BFT = Blue Force Tracker

BN S2 = battalion intelligence

CASEVAC/MEDEVAC = casualty evacuation/air medical evacuation

CIO/G6 = Army Chief Information Officer/G6

COIN = counterinsurgency

CoIST = company intelligence-support team

COMMEX = communications exercise

COP = combat outpost

CP = command post

CPOF = Command Post of the Future

CROWS = Common Remotely Operated Weapons Station

DCGS-A = Distributed Common Ground System-Army

FOB = forward operating base

FSC = forward support company

IED = improvised explosive device

KIA = killed in action

LMTV = light medium tactical vehicle

LZ = landing zone

M-ATV = MRAP all-terrain vehicle

mIRC = Microsoft Internet Relay Chat

MiTT = military training team

MTOE = modified table of organization and equipment

PLT = platoon

PMCS = preventative maintenance checks and services

PSG = platoon sergeant

QRF = quick reaction force

RIP/TOA = relief in place/transfer of authority

SIPR = secret internet protocol router

TAC = tactical command post

TOC = tactical operations center

USAID = United States Agency for International Development

aircraft's worth of passengers in the winter and would only get half an aircraft's worth in the summer. Also, flying in the mountain passes can be a little unnerving in marginal weather. During one air assault, the most direct pass was obscured with clouds, so all aircraft had to fly the long way around, adding an extra hour per turn into the LZ. That change in timeline eventually led to the whole operation being cancelled because we couldn't get enough combat power on the ground prior to bad weather moving into the area.

Ground-force commanders and aviation commanders need to meet and understand each other to build the relationships that a fully integrated air/ground team requires. It takes days or weeks to build trust between ground units and air units, and it only takes seconds for that trust to be broken by either misidentifying targets, fratricide or landing at the wrong LZ during an assault.

CPT Joseph Mroszczyk

A/1-6 FA

FOB Salerno, with PLTs in Khost, Paktya and Ghazni Provinces

Air Assault Combat Package

After conducting our first artillery air-assault mission, I was able to stage a large portion of the equipment and supplies required for subsequent air-assault operations in my storage containers. The ability to pull a mission together with relative ease made the follow-on air-assault operation so much smoother and less cumbersome. I would definitely recommend working to build a combat package that is ready to attack a week-long mission into the middle of nowhere and that can be tailored down if parts aren't needed.

CPT Brandon Gray

B/1-168 Infantry

COP Dand Patan, Paktya Province

Communication, Personnel and Morale

As a battlespace owner, I had to own and maintain my own COP. Formal communication assets such as satellite technol-

ogy, Blue Force Tracker, line of sight and cell phones will always fail when you need them to work their best. It's Murphy's Law, and no matter how many PMCSs you perform before COMMEX, something will always go wrong. It's important to have redundant means of communications so that you can effectively command and control and request resources for your unit. Informal communication between you, your subordinates and your ANSF partners is key to success. Everyone must understand the mission, commander's intent and guidance. Subordinate units will achieve success through confirmation briefs, backbriefs, rehearsals and more rehearsals.

"Personnel shortages" is the name of the game over here. You will never have enough people for your mission set. A good leader needs to be creative and understand how to "see himself" to bring the right enablers into the fight. Balancing force protection, mission, and QRF was a constant challenge, especially during the leave cycles.

Maintaining high morale and fighting complacency are difficult. Living in austere conditions for extended periods of time will wear on anyone. During the cold season, the fighting slows down, which means the excitement slows down. Even the best Soldiers begin to get comfortable in their patrolling techniques and will become irritable when they don't experience regular challenges. It is important to listen to your Soldiers; pay attention to what they have to say so that you can pick up on these sorts of things. Ensuring visits by the chaplain and doing small things such as grilling food will help morale. Enemy contact will fight complacency. Sounds peculiar, but it's true.

CPT Ben Weakley

A/3-1 Special Troops Battalion (Route Clearance)

FOB Salerno, Khost Province

Importance of the Company CP

How we chose to man our command post has been absolutely vital to our success in combat operations. Our MTOE is definitely not set up to man a 24-hour tactical CP with our

The most challenging leadership decision for CPT Joshua Wiles was not returning enemy mortar and rocket fire in the vicinity of a civilian population in Khost Province when "the strategic goal outweighed the immediate threat."

organic headquarters personnel. We have deliberately chosen to pull talented NCOs from the line to ensure that we have a competent battle-tracking capability. These NCOs have constantly "improved the foxhole" in our command post systems, to include maximizing our use of DCGS-A, CPOF, Centrixx and SIPR e-mail, mIRC, and Blue Force Tracker to feed relevant, actionable and timely IED-related intelligence to our patrols. In more than a dozen cases, our CP's battle NCO has pulled a flash report from an e-mail distribution list and populated the report to our patrols via BFT, resulting in an IED find at the reported location. Our robust CP has allowed us to effectively communicate in real-time with the four battalions we support, our organic battalion, and the brigade TOC. Many times, the CP's ability to receive a report and coordinate for rotary-wing assets has allowed a critical repair part to move forward in order to repair a detection or interrogation asset, allowing our patrol to complete its mission as opposed to recovering back to the FOB. Our CP coordinates with battlespace owners and the brigade aviation element to provide our patrols with QRF air-weapons teams or scout-weapons teams for additional security when our patrols experience an IED strike or troops-in-contact. Many units with similar manning issues may find it easier to keep all of their talent and manpower with their line platoons; however, in our case, making the hard decision to man our command post with some of our most talented people has paid huge dividends in IEDs found and lives saved on the battlefield.

CPT Chet Craw

B/1-6 FA

FOB Salerno, Khost Province

**Training Your Company
Intelligence-Support Team**

Train your CoIST personnel to operate as a BN S2 shop would and be able to produce the same products and analysis. Often you will have better situational awareness than the BN S2 shop, and, if you resource your CoIST correctly and network with all the intelligence pipelines available, you can increase your ability to target without a heavy reliance on BN to push targets to you. I would also train one or two additional personnel in each platoon to be alternate CoISTers. It is very hard to replace these individuals, and in the course of a deployment you will lose one or two, creating a gap that cannot be quickly filled without extensive training.

CPT Joshua Wiles

D/1-26 Infantry

COP Narizah, Khost Province

Difficult Leadership Decision

My most challenging leadership decision was not to return fire with indirect fire assets when being engaged with mortars and rockets by the enemy in the vicinity of civilian population. Insurgents were engaging our position effec-



tively but firing from inside and around a populated area. The decision not to return fire was extremely difficult because of the psychological effect on my own Soldiers. The strategic goal outweighed the immediate threat.

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Art by Jody Harmon

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