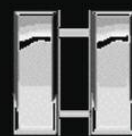


# CompanyCommand

## Building Combat-Ready Teams



**To:** Company Commanders  
**From:** Company Commanders

## Advising as We Withdraw From Afghanistan

Our role in Afghanistan continues to evolve. For years, we led the fight while the Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF) maintained a token presence in our operations. Around 2009, we took a step back and began to fight shoulder-to-shoulder with the ANSF in order to develop their soldiers' capability. Now, amid the drawdown of U.S. forces, we are charged with providing "over-the-shoulder" advice and support to the ANSF as they lead the fight in their country.

These days, we deploy as part of an SFAB and with only about half our assigned personnel. Our best lieutenants and NCOs may be detached to serve on an SFAAT that advises an Afghan battalion. Our companies are not battlespace owners; instead, we secure the SFAATs and manage the enablers that support them. What's it like? Although currently deployed to Afghanistan, we took some time to share our experiences.

### CPT Ed Gibbons

Company Commander

D/2-327 IN, 1st BCT, 101st Abn. Div. (Air Assault)

Every blue-blooded infantryman who deploys wants to get into a fight. We want to plan and execute offensive operations. We want to close with and destroy the enemy. We want to take charge and be in charge. Unfortunately, the freedom we once had as the battlespace owner is gone. We are now advisors and integrators. While the advising mission is less romantic, it offers unique challenges normally not encountered in the counterinsurgency fight. As a company commander, I am responsible for securing the advisory teams and acting as a vehicle for American combat power and medevac for the ANSF during in extremis situations.

The war is no longer an American fight. Although we are still on the battlefield, we have to allow the ANSF to fight the battle. Our mission is to make the ANSF better. Our mindset is: Long-term development of Afghan capabilities is often more important than short-term battlefield gains secured by American military power. We must fight the urge to over-enable the ANSF. They need to learn to work through the fog and friction of war. As such, you should position your men where they will be able to oversee the battle but not become decisively engaged. Once U.S. forces become engaged, all Afghan development stops while we destroy the enemy. In some instances, I have seen Afghan forces stop shooting, drink *chai* and watch as we directed artillery and bombs onto our common enemies. We must be their safety net, not their spear.

That said, the restrictive terrain in the northern Kunar River Valley and the determined enemy make it difficult to avoid contact. You must align your forces in a way that al-

lows the Afghans to assume responsibility for the principal direction of effort while you assume the defensive in a non-critical area. For example, during a recent *toufan* (company-level) operation, we colocated our TAC with the Afghan National Army's (ANA's) TAC on an observation point located on the western side of the Kunar River, roughly 1.5 kilometers west of the ANA objective on the eastern side of the river. This allowed us to observe the ANSF operation on the valley floor to the east and be far enough away to not become decisively engaged ourselves. The ANA soldiers were in heavy contact for most of the day and were doing a good job using their D30s (ANA artillery) to thwart multiple insurgent attacks. They asked for CF air assets, but we denied their requests because they didn't truly need them. About six hours into the operation, our joint TAC location received effective fire from the west. We used our 81 mm mortars and 105 mm artillery to destroy the threat. Because the fire from the west was effective, we immediately took over the fight to the west, but we allowed the ANA on the objective to continue their fight to the east.

The ANSF will continuously request your men and assets. Unless the ANA are at a critical impasse where they are about to fail, deny their requests. It is OK if the ANSF do not accomplish their objective; they often learn valuable lessons in defeat. You do not want them to learn these lessons at the cost of overwhelming casualties, however, or at the expense of your relationship with them. Ultimately, you must balance the need for ANSF development with your moral commitment as an ally and advisor. Failing to do this would risk driving a wedge between the ANSF and the CF advisors, making it very hard to continue to advise effectively. I saw this when an ANA first sergeant was killed.



*Soldiers help their Afghan counterparts learn to use a 60 mm mortar system. As U.S. forces draw down, soldiers are deploying as members of security force assistance brigades whose role is to advise and support Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF).*

The death really affected the ANA *kandak* commander, and he requested CF air support to cover the ground medevac of the first sergeant. Due to the ANA commander's emotional state, we felt we needed to support the ANA. While the Afghans did not need our air support to conduct their evacuation, we ultimately decided to commit our airpower to the grieving commander as a gesture of goodwill. Had we declined his request, the damage to our relationship with him could have been irreparable.

Your experience as an advisor will depend on the Afghans with whom you are partnered. During our time at COP Monti, the ANA *kandak* commander was switched from an illiterate former mujahideen fighter with no formal military training to a Soviet-trained commander with 30-plus years in the military. The difference between our advising approaches to these two commanders was akin to the difference between coaching Little League Baseball and the major leagues. Regardless of which league you're coaching, there is always room for improvement. Never lose focus and continue to make the Afghans better—you'll become better yourself.

#### **CPT Hall Wang**

**SFAAT Intelligence Officer**

**2-327 IN, 1st BCT, 101st Abn. Div. (Air Assault)**

Let me tell my story of being an SFAAT intelligence (S2) officer. When I arrived, I was told that the ANA commander doesn't care for intelligence; that the unit had just moved and had no sources; that all the ANA S2 staff does is ask for mobile minutes; and that discussing intelligence at all is considered a success.

Hearing this, all I could think about were the stories I'd heard from my friends in Teach for America (TFA). All their chatter about unmotivated students, underfunded schools and uncaring parents mirrored my situation in many ways. I thought a lot about TFA's educational philosophy, which is "high standards equal high achievement."

Initially, I wasn't sure how I could position myself to set meaningful high standards for my Afghan S2 staff. I'm a 26-year-old with no children and, in terms of facial hair, I am too "follicle challenged" to even grow stubble. I don't exactly have standing in the Afghan mind, or so the SFAAT academy taught me.

#### **CompanyCommand Glossary**

**CERP-** commander's emergency relief program  
**CF-** coalition forces  
**CFT-** cross-functional team  
**COP-** combat outpost  
**IPB-** intelligence preparation of the battlefield  
**kandak-** Afghan army battalion  
**medevac-** medical evacuation  
**MRAP-** mine-resistant ambush protected vehicle  
**M-ATV-** MRAP all-terrain vehicle  
**PIR-** priority information requirement  
**SFAB-** security force assistance brigade  
**SFAAT-** security force advisory and assistance team  
**TAC-** tactical operations center (forward)  
**TEU-** 20-foot equivalent unit





*CPT Tad Coleman, a security forces advisor and assistance team (SFAAT) leader, reviews a map with the Afghan soldiers he is supporting.*

After hours of engagements with my Afghan counterparts, I identified three traits among my Afghan S2 staff that would offer me leverage:

- They are big on trying to look good in front of others.
- They are captivated by all forms of graphics—for example, maps, charts, matrices and pictures.
- Americans are respected as technical gurus.

With that in mind, I figured out my lesson plan and, one subject at a time, developed their intelligence skills. I would identify a subject in which I knew the S2 staff was deficient. I would highlight their deficiencies to pressure them into wanting to fix them, because they want to look good in front of a supposed American intelligence guru. Once I got their attention, I made the high standards known. I provided sample products and references translated into *Dari* so they would have the tools to achieve to those standards. The samples I provided were built the way they liked—graphically oriented. We agreed on deadlines and I would check on their execution. If I didn't think they met my high standards, I would press them for proper edits, using samples and references as guides. If they missed deadlines, I would make them realize they failed our agreement and pressure them to get back on track. The results? One by one, IPB products, threat-networks catalogs, PIRs and other S2 products got hammered out to high standards. Eventually, the Afghan S2 staff got so used to high standards that they began—on their own initiative—to exceed my standards through extra effort and creative license.

My team jokingly compares me to chef Gordon Ramsay to knock my unrelenting high standards and tough love. I smile because I know it's working when I see and hear

about Afghan commanders understanding that S2 staff business is serious business.

### **CPT Craig Bosveld**

#### **SFAAT Leader**

**1-89 CAV, 2nd BDE, 10th Mtn. Div.**

Advising is a difficult task for many reasons. Most young lieutenants and sergeants who comprise the advising teams view the execution of duties within the Army rigidly, in black and white. Some have previous combat experiences that cloud their opinion of the ANSF. Many are very young, which can work against them as advisors to older counterparts. Many Afghans, for their part, have had American advisors in the past and are tempered by those experiences. The difference in religion can also be an obstacle to building rapport. Although this list isn't exhaustive, it illustrates the kinds of difficulties that advisors face. Identifying and mitigating these challenges is crucial to success.

None of my team had advising experience before this deployment. We worked very hard at the beginning of our tour to build rapport with the ANA and gain their respect. Although we worked hard, we also spent an extraordinary amount of time trying to gauge the effectiveness of our efforts. During the first two to three months, we made a concerted effort to be students to our ANA counterparts. Being a student requires humility, which goes a long way in building rapport. Once the Afghans had taught us things, they naturally became open to learning from us. This reciprocal method of rapport, however, got us only so far. Sharing is what took us to the next level. Sharing is very powerful in the Afghan culture—sharing a meal, sharing stories, sharing time, sharing hardship and, ultimately, sharing danger.

It was in our third month of deployment that we accompanied the *kandak* on an out-of-sector mission. Near the end of the mission, the stage was set for an offensive operation against a well-defended enemy stronghold. The ANA soldiers and leaders found themselves at a stalemate in a tough fight with a determined enemy. We didn't bring helicopters, bombs or artillery to turn the tide in favor of the ANA, nor did we push from the rear. We simply reinforced the basics—fire and maneuver. We moved forward and placed a premium on leadership through presence. The comfort that the *kandak* leaders felt from us fighting alongside them was what they needed to turn the tide and ultimately win that day. From that day forward, we were seen as warriors. In a warrior culture, this is priceless. Those 20 minutes of shared chaos and mortal danger have paid dividends to us as advisors.

*CPT Hall Wang, SFAAT intelligence officer, advises an Afghan National Army officer how to develop intelligence staff. Wang discovered the Afghans were “captivated by all forms of graphics,” and he used maps, charts, matrices and pictures to engage their attention.*



### **CPT Ryan Arrington**

**Deputy Support Operations Officer**

**TF Taskmaster, 1st BDE, 101st Abn. Div. (Air Assault)**

Part of our mission is to retrograde the stockpiles of equipment that have accumulated here over the past 12 years. When we arrived last fall, we were responsible for more than 5,000 TEUs of property—that’s more than three TEUs per Soldier. We began retrograding everything that wasn’t mission essential or cemented to the ground. We used the host-nation trucking system to its maximum extent and moved more than 51 percent of our equipment by unescorted host-nation trucks, which was great for the local economy. Any piece of equipment of a sensitive nature was escorted by CF from the Bastogne footprint to Bagram Airfield for turn-in. What was not shipped was either signed over to the ANSF—therefore strengthening their capabilities—or de-milled and sold in the local economy (like scrap metal). What is left is equipment that is truly mission essential—MRAPS, M-ATVs, weapon systems, force protection and munitions. We as a brigade are approaching what we call an “assistance platform,” which means we are capable of living with and advising the ANSF at an expeditionary level. Past the halfway point in our nine-month deployment, we are nearly expeditionary on all bases except vital locations that will endure beyond this brigade’s time in Afghanistan.

By the time this deployment ends, we will have shipped more than 4,000 TEUs, closed the supply support activity and removed all of its 5,000 line items, reduced our ammunition supply point by more than 1 million rounds and 300 short tons of legacy ammunition, and transferred 10 tactical bases to the ANSF. We may not have conducted maneuver warfare during our deployment, but we have maneuvered

equipment on the battlefield to set the conditions for follow-on advise-and-assist missions, and for the ANSF to effectively and decisively take the fight to the enemy and win. As a logistician, I am proud of the speed and ferocity with which the brigade executed a mission that we never trained for.

### **CPT Max Pappas**

**Troop Commander**

**C/1-89 CAV, 2nd BDE, 10th Mtn. Div.**

My troop strength here is only 59 individuals, assigned and attached. I am responsible for effects in three districts, yet I have no CERP funds and am not allowed to leave the wire without the ANSF except under very specific circumstances. Despite this lack of resources and abundance of restrictions, this configuration has led to the most long-lasting and obvious success in a counterinsurgency that I have seen during almost three years of combat deployments.

For years, U.S. forces have acted as the big brother to the burgeoning ANSF. We drove operations—even when we weren’t supposed to—because our units were always strong enough that we didn’t need the ANSF the way they needed us. We could operate unilaterally, add a pair of ANSF trucks to the mix, then go and achieve the effects we thought were necessary in the battlespace. This approach to partnering was disingenuous and did little to improve the capacity of the ANSF or their ownership of the mission.

Under the SFAB concept, we are forced to integrate much more closely with our Afghan partners because, for the first time, we rely on their combat power and prowess as much as they rely on our enablers and technical skills. The concept of fighting with “Afghan fists” is important, and for the first time it truly represents how we go about engaging the enemy and achieving effects in the battlespace. Be-





*CPT Ed Gibbons (left), with 1SG Jonathan Reffeor, encourages advisors to “balance the need for ANSF development with your moral commitment as an ally and advisor.”*

fore, an operation would focus solely on the impact we could have on the enemy. Now, we concentrate on how ANSF operations have an effect on the enemy and how our work with our Afghan counterparts affects their capabilities. This important shift effectively doubles the positive effect of each operation when we plan and conduct it properly, and it speeds us closer to the point where the Afghan forces are able to operate independently and defeat insurgent forces on their own.

So, where does my troop fit into this entire scheme? Quite simply, we are a CFT that serves as a node that connects combat power, enablers, sustainment and advising. We provide the SFAAT's advisors with access to the full weight of the resources of the U.S. Army, while simultaneously providing higher headquarters with visibility on operations being conducted and on the status of advisory initiatives. The troop-level unit—so long the main effort—is now relegated to a support role, unable to operate independently and no longer the sole entity responsible for Afghan integration. This is a difficult shift for many. It requires a mature understanding of the purpose of operations, when to push the Afghan units to act, and when to stand back and simply accept their decisions.

Partnered operations now fit into the larger scheme of advising. The CFT needs to be careful to tread the line by supporting the ANSF to win where they fight, yet also helping the advisors by enforcing the systems to ensure that ANSF units learn and grow into more effective fighting organizations. An important part of this is to engage the Afghan leadership and soldiers and consistently strive to build a strong,

positive relationship based on trust and mutual support. While the CFT is not responsible for advice, it is responsible for setting an example in terms of planning, execution and discipline. A strong, disciplined CFT provides an example for the advisors to point to, gives a goal for the Afghans to strive for, and has the ancillary benefit of ensuring that when forced to fight, the combined CFT/SFAAT/ANSF element is much more likely to defeat the insurgents as well as gain additional credibility with the local populace and confidence in themselves.

By forcing the SFAB to do more with fewer Soldiers, we forced a realignment of priorities and resources. Could we accomplish the same mission if we were organized as a regular brigade combat team? Certainly we could, but we have proven over the last few years that we simply will not. When we have to rely on our Afghan partners for our own survival and success, our priorities shift to make sure that they are as good as we can possibly make them. Soldiers at every level now understand that our effects on our allies are just as important, if not more important, than our effects on the enemy.

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*The full texts of these leaders' contributions, plus additional input from Captains Jeff Bernasconi, Brandon Farley, Justin Liesen, John Reinke and Ryan Smith, are available in the CompanyCommand and Platoon Leader online professional forums at <http://cc.army.mil> and <http://pl.army.mil>. The complete library of CompanyCommand articles that have appeared in ARMY since 2005 are available at <http://cc.army.mil/pubs/armymagazine>.*

*Company commanders: Please join us in the new-and-improved version of our online professional forum to continue the conversation: <http://CC.army.mil>.*



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