



# SMALL WARS JOURNAL

---

smallwarsjournal.com

## Combat Advising the ANA 205<sup>th</sup> Commandos: An Operational Perspective

by Tim C. Leival

One of the goals of the Operational Art is to effectively translate the expression of national will, in the form of strategy, into concrete tactical tasks; preferably ones that can be assigned metrics to mark progress.<sup>1</sup> This paper reflects the application of the Art in the small example of the Afghan National Army 205<sup>th</sup> Commandos and Special Forces Operational Detachment A 2132.

ODA 2132 received the mission to Combat Advise the 205<sup>th</sup> Commandos at literally the worst time imaginable. We had just lost our Detachment Commander<sup>2</sup> to an IED attack that also gravely wounded our Junior Engineer. We were down to eight personnel, one of whom, our Intelligence Sergeant (18F), would be serving as escort for our Commander and would be gone for almost a month. Our pre-mission training had been focused on the more usual ODA mission set. We were grieving and dispirited, but eagerly looking to get back into the fight.

When we received our change of mission brief from LTC Heinz Dinter (Task Force 32 Commander), he made it very clear that he was assigning us to the CJSOTF-A Commander's (COL Haas) designated Main Effort not because of our limitations, but because of our strengths. As a National Guard Detachment, we have a collection of experience and education of unusual breadth and depth as well as a wealth of time spent working with indigenous soldiers in many venues. Events proved his concept to be correct and, more germane to the thesis; we had already demonstrated an adherence to the principle of Cognitive processes<sup>3</sup> in prosecution of Irregular Warfare. This principle is commonly and incorrectly expressed as "putting an Afghan face" on tactical operations. Because of our life experiences, our detachment was able to correctly interpret this principle into the action of avoiding creating dependencies at any level. Properly expressed by our Junior Communications Sergeant, "An Afghan Solution to an Afghan problem" became our mantra and rallying cry when less flexible minds tried to make the Commandos into institutional mirror-images of their own light infantry organizations.

---

<sup>1</sup> *Introduction to Operational Art* DR. M. Vego, JMO Department, U.S. Naval War College 2005

<sup>2</sup> MAJ Jeff Calero, RIP brother, we've got it from here [http://www.mainesecurity.com/IMO/imo\\_jeff\\_calero.htm](http://www.mainesecurity.com/IMO/imo_jeff_calero.htm)

<sup>3</sup> *War by Other Means: Building Complete and Balanced Capabilities for Counterinsurgency*, Gompert, David C and Gordon, John IV National Defense Research Institute, Rand Corporation. Arlington VA 2008



**Figure One. Commando trainees master the art of land navigation in a practical exercise during training at Camp Morehead. Motivation, cooperation and leadership overcome literacy challenges.**

Upon arriving at Camp Morehead where the Commando Training Center is being built, we were introduced to an organizationally mature Commando Training Cadre (CTC). This host nation force, under LTC Malik, was responsible for the training infrastructure for the Commando Program. LTC Malik and his staff had been trained together under US Special Forces auspices from its inception and they were professional and efficient. The CTC was directly advised (very ably) by ODA 3333 (CPT Boers) under the SOTF 3330 (MAJ Bollinger). It was also supported by a dizzying array of other agencies and institutions. These included the Combined Security Transition Command<sup>4</sup> (CSTC-A) and the subordinate Afghan Regional Integration Command Security Command (ARSIC)<sup>5</sup> with its Embedded Tactical Trainers (ETTs) and Mentor programs. Also present was a contract service; Military Professional Resources Incorporated (MPRI), who was tasked with training staff procedures, indirect fire, and selected logistics.

Except for the SOTF, this panoply of agencies represented the expression of (inter-)national will in that they were pursuing the noble Strategic goal of building the military capability of the Host Nation in concert with the precept of “DIME” (Diplomatic, Intelligence, Military and Economic)<sup>6</sup> as measures of a state’s influence. The problem was, except for the

<sup>4</sup> <http://www.cstc-a.com/mission/AfghanistanArmyFacts.html> Combined Security Transition Command homepage, accessed 08 Nov 2008

<sup>5</sup> <http://www.cstc-a.com/mission/ARSIC.html> Fact Sheet on Regional Security Integration Command, accessed 08 Nov 2008

<sup>6</sup> [http://www.strategypage.com/on\\_point/2005524.aspx](http://www.strategypage.com/on_point/2005524.aspx) The Strategy Page, accessed on 04 Nov 2008

SOTF 3330, the agencies were focused on making the Commandos into military organizations that they recognized: British Royal Marines, US Army Rangers, Australian Light Infantry Battalions, etc... This is not, in of itself, a bad method, it is only self-limiting and ultimately discouraging when the expectation is not met. If there is any latent xenophobia, this becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy that reinforces prejudices. This third order of effects is readily observed by the lack of rapport some individuals and units have with the Commandos, despite their close physical proximity. By applying our mantra (“An Afghan solution...”) we were able to remind ourselves (and others) continually that it may not look like Camp Lejune or Sandhurst, but it is the Commando solution that counts for the future.



**Figure Two. Under the watchful eyes of ODA and USN medical personnel, 205<sup>th</sup> Commando medics assist in a mass casualty event in the aftermath of a suicide vehicle-borne improvised explosive device (SVBIED). Commando medics received invaluable trauma management experience while alleviating the suffering of their neighbors due to terrorist attacks.**

Because of our Special Forces training, SOTF 3330 and ODA 2132 recognized that the elements of national power (DIME) are integrated and do not exist in a vacuum. Therefore, the job of building one capability influences and is influenced by the others. Military organizations do not “solve” insurgencies by themselves or, expressed another way; you can’t kill your way to victory.<sup>7</sup> The result of this awareness was that the SOTF and the ODA had to gain and maintain engagement with the diplomatic and intelligence networks at our level (and several levels higher) and do our best to monitor the economic situation. The concept of integrating actions to influence all facets of national influence to defeat terror groups is not new or original: a clear

---

<sup>7</sup> <http://www.afghanistannews.net/story/416845> Admiral Michael Mullin, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, commenting on the release of the National Intelligence Estimate on 10 Oct 2008. Reported in various sources.

expression of this concept can be found in the conclusions of Seth Jones and Martin Libeki's excellent monograph *How Terrorist Groups End*.<sup>8</sup>

This presented the ODA with three ongoing challenges: First, continually defining our role to our non-SF brethren. Second, maintaining a suitable level of command relationship with the Commandos. Third, to define success for the Commandos in a way that did not create dependencies and provided our command with support for an exit strategy.

The first challenge was starkly illuminated when we reached Camp Morehead and were introduced to the supporting agencies. We had to clearly and repeatedly explain that although we assumed visible roles as primary and assistant instructors and covered down on jobs related to our MOSs (Military Occupational Specialties); we were emphatically *not* ETTs or Mentors. The aforementioned jobs are important and vital to the effort, but they do not equate to the task of Combat Advising<sup>9</sup>. The lack of understanding for this role caused some friction when we appeared at International Security Assistance Forces (ISAF) and Afghan Ministry of Defense (MoD) level meetings. We went to the meetings to gain influence for the Commandos in the political (i.e., diplomatic), intelligence and military arenas. We were viewed as interlopers and too junior in rank by some of the ISAF folks. Fortunately; our rapport with the 205<sup>th</sup> Commando Commander, LTC Bismullah, was very strong and his influence (particularly with the MoD personnel) kept us present and very engaged.

A word about LTC Bismullah and rapport: Bismullah is a charismatic, highly educated and well-read soldier. In his youth he worked as a stringer for Reuters and thoroughly understands the power of the media. He knows the name of every soldier in his battalion and has worked with many of them for years. He is equally comfortable discussing Persian poetry over chai as maneuvering companies in contact. He instinctively understood our role as advisors, and did not look to us for handouts or tactical answers. He was grateful for the Coalition presence in his country, and was straightforward in his anticipation of the day we could leave. His leadership and appreciation for our role set the stage for our successful rapport.

Rapport is a much referred-to but poorly defined task, but it *is* the concrete tactical task that supports all diplomatic and many military strategic goals. (It may be a pillar of the economic influences as well, but I have little or no experience in that arena and cannot say.) It is incumbent on the practitioner of Operational Art to understand rapport, but even the definition of rapport given in FM 3-05.202 Foreign Internal Defense (FID) mostly tells you what rapport is not.<sup>10</sup> This leaves one to rely on personal experience and close observation of good and bad examples of rapport. In this, our detachment was fortunate in that we had all worked well with host nation soldiers in other venues and we had, as a detachment, an abiding respect for professional soldiers of any organization. We were therefore able to fully leverage our relationship with the Commandos to effectively advise them in matters tactical and operational and satisfy the negative metric described in the FM, i.e. "...no loss of rapport."

---

<sup>8</sup> *How Terrorist Groups End: Lessons for Countering Al Qaeda* Seth Jones and Martin Libeki, Rand Corporation Arlington VA 2008.

<sup>9</sup> Training Circular 31-73 Special Forces Advisors Guide July 2008 Although this excellent document was not available when ODA 2132 was advising in the winter of 2007-2008, a draft version was provided to us by the 20<sup>th</sup> Group CCWO, CW5 John Friberg, which proved timely and useful.

<sup>10</sup> "Rapport is a sympathetic relationship between people that is based on mutual trust, understanding, and respect. Personal dislike, animosity, and other forms of friction characterize the lack of rapport." FM 3-05.202, Appendix F, para 8

The second challenge, maintaining a suitable command relationship with the Commandos, refers not to us as Advisors but to the Commandos' relationship to the MoD, ISAF and their Regional Commands (RC's). Prior to our assignment to the 205<sup>th</sup> Commandos, a draft document proposing details of the command structure of the nascent Commando Regiment in relation to its Mentors. This paper had been agreed to in principle and a mission approval process had been proposed. This process reflected the dominance of the ISAF view that that independent action by Afghan tactical units was well over the horizon.

During our ongoing mission analysis, the ODA had identified several facts and assumptions as well as at least one implied task connected with the Commandos' future employment.

The facts were:

- The Coalition was going away someday
- The Commandos presently relied on us for intelligence, air support and limited logistical support

The assumption was:

- The nascent Commando Regiment had or would develop informal systems to eventually diminish or supplant the need for support in the areas of intelligence, air support and logistics

The implied task was to prevent the formation of dependencies and disconnect the current reliance on Coalition largesse that came with too much baggage.

We set about this strategic imperative with a series of tactical tasks. We shamelessly leveraged the ISAF unfamiliarity with our Advisor mission to insert ourselves into the series of meetings that represented the decision cycle on how the Commando Regiment would be employed in the future. By paying attention to the flow of information at these meetings, we were able to volunteer to do the staff work to propose the Regimental method of employment to the MoD. We recognized that in the Afghan martial culture once something is on paper it becomes law; so we crafted our proposal to wrest the mission nomination and approval process from the ISAF mentors and place the decision cycle in the MoD chain of command. We accomplished this by modifying the graphics on the brief to depict the following:

Mission Tasking comes through the MoD. Mission nomination could come from ISAF or the CJSOTF-A, but it had to be through the MoD to the Regimental Command. MoD and the Commandos become the supported commands. RCs and CJSOTF-A CONOPs became supporting documents to Commando missions with their own approval routes, but were designed to provide those elements that the Commandos were still developing. A proposed Joint, Combined mission synch matrix spelled out the tasks of all agencies during the mission cycle, with the MoD clearly the ascendant agency.<sup>11</sup> The sections that aroused the most controversy were the OPSEC difficulties within the MoD and the synchronization of the supporting CONOPs.

---

<sup>11</sup> This briefing, complete with the graphics as originated by the detachment and presented to the MoD, is available on the CJSOTF-A SIPR network.

When the proposed Commando Employment Methodology was briefed to the Ministry of Defense (Major General Bismallah Khan) at a cabinet-level meeting in March of 2008, it was accepted virtually unchanged from our presentation and became doctrine.

Interestingly, the implications for the 3<sup>rd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> order of effects for these changes were barely discussed in the RC (South) and ISAF meetings and perhaps were not noticed until they took effect. One of those effects was that the Combat Advisors assumed a very large role in the mission feasibility and selection for the 205<sup>th</sup> Commandos. Since we were a CJSOTF-A asset, we could leverage our extraordinary access to intelligence, air support and limited logistical support to make their plans more feasible and aid in our credibility in nominating missions for them. This became starkly apparent when the Commandos conducted a highly successful company raid in support of a CJSOTF-A operation on the same day they declined a battalion movement-to-contact mission in support of an ISAF operation.

None of the foregoing information is meant to disparage or diminish the ISAF or CSTC-A mission or methods. While their method and focus is slightly different than ours, they are thoughtful and committed warriors and they do their job very well. Evidence of this is the superb critique and proposed methodology on the Advisor mission proposed by CPT Daniel Helmer in his monograph “Twelve Urgent Steps for the Advisor Mission in Afghanistan”<sup>12</sup> which is an excellent plan to address many of the same issues discussed here.

This brought us to the final challenge: Defining success for the Commandos in a way that did not create dependencies. This took us to the very limits of our Operational Art on a daily basis; while the detachment was deep in the process of influencing the future of Commando employment, we were also busy translating the strategic policies of maximizing Afghan government influence into tactical tasks of preparing the 205<sup>th</sup> Commandos for independent action. This manifested itself on the very basic levels of training and, from the outside, it looked like SF soldiers<sup>13</sup> teaching and training Host Nation forces while coordinating for logistical support. But the actual process went much deeper than that and included supporting their chain of command in tactical decisions, coordinating for and conducting mission specific training and, perhaps most important, creating the liaisons and structure for the “enablers” to nest their missions with the Commandos operations.

One of the best examples of this depth is the role of the ODA in effecting the lash-up between the 205<sup>th</sup> Commandos and the CJSOTF-A Information Operations (IO) campaign. The CJSOTF-A Commander had a clear set of IO goals over the broad range of capabilities and we did our best to leverage them all. By creating a direct liaison with the TF-32 Psychological Operations (PSYOP) assets in the form of weekly chai meetings with the 205<sup>th</sup> Commando staff<sup>14</sup> at their cantonment area, the PSYOP folks were able to nest their campaign in with Commando messages, refine (and grammatically correct) their printed products before distribution and use Commando soldiers to deliver themes and messages both into family networks and on their objectives. We got immediate feedback from several of our own networks

---

<sup>12</sup>*Twelve Urgent Steps for the Advisor Mission in Afghanistan* CPT Daniel Helmer, Military Review, July-August 2008

<sup>13</sup> US Special Forces in the form of SFODAs 2132 and 3332 with the expert and cheerful instruction in advanced CQB by Canadian Special Forces: CANSOF’s wholly voluntary and very intensive contribution to the 205<sup>th</sup> Commando’s battlefield prowess cannot be overstated

<sup>14</sup>The Commando Regimental Table of Organization allows for a Battalion Staff to have both a Religious Officer (mullah) and an Intelligence Officer (S2). In the case of the 205<sup>th</sup>, both positions were held by officers trained in classic Soviet-style intelligence, including propaganda. They were very good at tailoring messages and themes to the local idiom for maximum acceptance.

that this was very effective for shaping public perceptions of the Commandos. The IO Public Affairs assets recorded several radio interviews with LTC Bismullah and broadcast them with great effect in conjunction with a Commando Capabilities Exercise put on for the benefit of local politicians and VIPs. The IO Combat Camera crew was tasked to document training, everyday life and actual missions with the Commandos and some of their products are contained in this paper. CJSOTF-A Tactical HUMINT Teams accompanied the Commandos on their first objectives and shaped future operations while teaching Commandos how to collect using their natural situational awareness advantage.

But IO was not the only example of detachment members translating strategy into tactical tasks. To paraphrase the bumper sticker: “Think strategically, act tactically” was a common business practice for us. By way of example, during one nightly hot wash we identified treatment of females by government soldiers as one theme being exploited by local insurgents as a friction point between the government acceptances by the general population. One week later, the detachment had incorporated a Civilians on the Battlefield (COB) scenario into the Close Quarters Combat (CQB) training using female volunteers from a medical service unit. When the shock of finding females in their shoot-house wore off, the Commandos quickly developed a plan for handling women in a professional and culturally acceptable manner. This paid off in tactical and strategic dividends when photos and anecdotes of good treatment of females and other non-combatants made its way into the local information networks.

Did we succeed in our efforts to make policy into effective action, to “Think strategically and act tactically”? I offer two vignettes to supply a basis for your evaluation.

Shortly after the ODA’s introduction to the 205<sup>th</sup> Commando, we were observing a class taught by MPRI on staff procedures. The practical exercise included the planning of a tactical operation including the usual graphics. At the end of the exercise, each instructor got his opportunity to critique the plan and some found it to be overly complicated and generally unworkable. At the end of the session, all the eyes in the classroom turned to the “ODA guys” in back of the class, with the implication that the “tactical experts” would have their whack at things. After a couple of moments of shuffling anticipation, one ODA member addressed LTC Bismullah directly. “Sir, we’re your Combat Advisors. We’re not here to judge your plan; we’re here to support it.” Later, LTC Bismullah recalled that moment as the point when his rapport with the ODA began.

Months later, the 205<sup>th</sup> Commando Battalion had prosecuted its first targets flawlessly, yielding multiple detentions of sought-after terror network personnel, destruction of (literally) tons of processed opium and recovery of multiple shipments and caches of weapons. The Combat Advisory mission had passed from 2132 to 3334 as we prepared to rotate home. On a sunny morning in early April the 205<sup>th</sup> Commando Battalion Commander contacted his Advisor and invited the ODA to accompany the Battalion on a mission. The Commandos had used their own intelligence resources to develop an emergent target and had done the detailed planning to prosecute the mission. They had developed a transportation plan with sustainment and contingencies built in.



**Figure Four. Green Cycle Commandos rehearse helicopter infil and exfil 48 hours before a mission. This was the first aircraft experience for most of the Commandos. Note that the control and count is by Commando chain of command, not the Combat Advisors or aircrew.**

The ODA Advisors accompanied the Commandos on their mission and provided a bit of air support just to seal the deal. No one could say that the method or planning looked much like anything like Fort Benning would teach, but the outcome included the capture of multiple demonstrably bad guys with a surfeit of evidentiary-quality intelligence to ensure they stayed caught. The 205<sup>th</sup> Commandos had effectively supplanted the intelligence, air support and limited logistical support usually provided by the Coalition with their own systems to prosecute a target in support of a MoD objective.

Finally, several quotes from Lieutenant General John Mulholland, former Commander of Special Operations Command Central (SOCCENT) and current US Army Special Operations Command (USASOC) Commander:

The focus of coalition special operations right now is to ensure that there is a collective synergy with the Afghan Ministry of Defense and fielded forces. Close coordination between NATO's International Security Force, or ISAF, the Ministry of Defense and the Combined Joint Special Operations Task Force Afghanistan remains critical as we combine our efforts towards the same objectives... As always, a key objective is to deliberately enable and empower the Afghan forces to eventually plan and conduct operations independently... The Afghan National Army Commandos are an excellent example of progress... They have shown initiative and proven their effectiveness on the battlefield.<sup>15</sup>

---

<sup>15</sup> Lieutenant General John Mulholland, from an interview in Special Operations Technology in March 2008. Reprinted in Special Warfare magazine in the July-August 2008 issue.



An Afghan solution to an Afghan problem.

*CW3 Tim Leival was the Detachment Commander on SFODA 2132, Co C, 1/20<sup>th</sup> SFG(A). He has served as Executive Officer, Commander, Junior Weapons Sergeant, Intelligence Sergeant and Assistant Detachment Commander on 2132, as well as XO, S4, S3, S2 and Assistant Training NCO in the same Company over the last 26 years. Prior to that, he served as Mortar Platoon Ammo Bearer and Platoon Leader in various Reserve Component Infantry units.*

This is a single article excerpt of material published in [Small Wars Journal](#).  
Published by and COPYRIGHT © 2010, Small Wars Foundation.

Permission is granted to print single copies for personal, non-commercial use. Select non-commercial use is licensed via a Creative Commons BY-NC-SA 3.0 license per our [Terms of Use](#).

No FACTUAL STATEMENT should be relied upon without further investigation on your part sufficient to satisfy you in your independent judgment that it is true.

Please consider [supporting Small Wars Journal](#).

