

A Time for Sergeants

COIN Success at the Company and Platoon Level in Afghanistan

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SSG Whiteside of 1/D/3-187 assists and advises an ANA led patrol in Khost Province

“How do you eat an elephant?”
The answer: “One bite at a time.”
Afghan Proverb

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Introduction

The Afghan environment is like no other. Being able to address problems in multi-dimensional terms has never been more important. Do your homework. The Afghan National Security Force (ANSF) elements vary from location to location, unit to unit, and person to person. Levels of discipline, training, leadership, capacity and capability range the full spectrum. The following information is to provide you and your unit with recommendations that may or may not work in your area of responsibility (AOR). So, use what is appropriate at your location and develop the ANSF to support the success of the mission.

Lines of Operation and

The counterinsurgency (COIN) mission in Afghanistan is challenging. Micro-insurgencies and social dynamics vary in each District, Valley, Village, and Qalat. Years of separation from a centralized government and lack of a unifying culture have made Afghans independent, self-reliant, and resistant to change. Rugged terrain hinders any type of infrastructure development that could unify the country. What we might consider to be corruption is seen as normal business for the Afghan; whether he is a soldier, policeman, tribal elder, or a shepherd. But do not look at this situation arrogantly and remember that we also have corruption in our countries. The difference is that in Afghanistan, survival is the main motivating factor in daily life.

Your unit has the mission of overcoming these and other challenges to the best of your ability. Taken as a whole the task seems impossible; however looking at what you can do to affect your areas of responsibilities as a tactical leader makes the challenges manageable. Execution of COIN falls on you and your soldiers because you are located with the population.

The COIN Strategy for Afghanistan is made up of lines of operation (LOO) or lines of effort (LOE). These are; securing the populace, enabling the ANSF, support to governance, support to development, and information operations. These LOOs are the method the International Security Assistance Forces (ISAF) use to accomplish its overall COIN mission. Your team has the organic capability to execute some of these LOOs, but not all. Perfect those you can accomplish and ask for assistance with the rest.

Enabling the ANSF in the execution of the COIN strategy is platoon business. All of the enablers that are deployed to Afghanistan serve to support you and the areas you secure. Without security none of the remaining LOOs will succeed. Enabling the ANSF ensures you won't have to continue to deploy to maintain the security you establish. Enabling the ANSF allows ISAF and the Government of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan (GIROA) the time and

space to implement the governance and development strategies. The group of professionals to accomplish this mission is the non-commissioned officer (NCO) corps. ANSF elements include the Afghan National Army (ANA), Afghan National Police (ANP), Afghan Border Police (ABP), and the Afghan Public Protection Force (APPF). Enabling the ANSF in the COIN execution is “a time for sergeants” to do what they do, train and build teams that can fight and survive in any environment. The officers develop the mission and intent and the NCOs are the implementers and executors of the strategy. They must be informed on the importance of their individual actions. How the individual soldier reacts and what they do today and everyday hereafter matters - and they need to know their impact.

Protecting the Populace

Protecting the Populace can be a hard thing for a Combat Arms Soldier to understand. A unit that excels in fire and maneuver may require a translator to explain the subtasks that support this vital LOO. Here are the basics:

Patrolling.

You can't protect anyone if you aren't there. Patrolling disrupts the enemy's planning and operation cycle, prevents them from threatening the people and inhibits their opportunities to mass and attack you at the combat outpost (COP). Use the ANSF to develop relationships with the local populace and take the lead.

Information.

Protecting the populace will open up a wealth of information to your team. The information you gather from interacting with the people will help you focus your efforts. They will tell you what's going on in their area. They know who belongs and who doesn't. If your unit has more than one village in your area of responsibility, then task organize and assign a squad or team to be the main collector of information for that town. Make them get smart on it; document the key people, where they live, their family size and story. Know who you are dealing with in the area.

Use biometric collection equipment when visiting businesses and patrolling near bazaars to catalogue and paint the picture of the people with whom you interact.

Interaction.

Afghans, for all of their independence, are also a friendly people. Find common ground, ask the questions you need to ask, but be interested in them too. Don't promise anything you can't deliver. You can look into things, but broken promises are hard to overcome and have been a

common thread to the Afghan populace. If something is promised and not delivered it becomes the focal point for all future interactions. You don't have time to waste on that. Bottom line: under promise and over deliver

Lastly, talk just to talk, in order to build a relationship. You must have patience and be able to listen.

Trust.

Gaining their trust is accomplished through consistency, showing genuine interest in their situation. If you aren't "that guy" find someone on your team who is and let him do it. Some ANSF elements and individuals are from the area they are operating in and should be utilized to build trust and relations with the local populace.

Enabling the ANSF

This equates to three simple things that are typical in a COIN environment. Initially, you must train the ANSF to a level that they will survive during direct force engagements with the enemy and that they realize that they are the protectors of the Afghan nation and its people. Secondly, you must assist the ANSF with the professionalization of their force in order to bring pride, confidence and loyalty to the uniform and Afghan nation they represent. Finally, you must get out of your comfort zone and advise the ANSF. This will let them take the lead. At the end of day, the ANSF will take over and be out in front. Their success or failure rests on your shoulders. So train, assist, and advise them with that understanding. But more to the point: do not just train the ANSF; train WITH the ANSF. Doing so will be the key to their success.

There are several things to consider while developing a course of action (COA) for enabling the ANSF. First off, you need to understand that they do not have the same level of nutrition. Their diet is definitely different than our western diet. Whereas we eat a lot of protein and generally have a high caloric intake, they do not. Next, they do not drink enough water day-to-day or during the conduct of operations. In view of this, their attention span is diminished. So, just realize that.

Additionally, you must recognize that the ANSF do not get all of the information overload that your soldiers are exposed to or get. What is meant by that is: your soldiers get constant visual and auditory information through television, video games, radio, newspapers, magazines, movies, billboards, signs, music, other technologies, and social events. Due to this abundance of information and interaction, Coalition Force (CF) soldiers tend to understand, pick up things,

adapt, and learn faster now than ever before. It is imperative that you understand the cultural differences.

There are many challenges for a war fighting platoon in the COIN environment. Add to that the “population-centric” focus and it gets exponentially more difficult. Changing a mindset that has kept you alive up to this point is not going to be easy. However, with your ability to adapt, it should be much easier now, more so than any other time throughout history.

As stated, in the COIN environment, the responsibility of enabling the ANSF lies on the shoulders of the platoon. You must be able to shift focus and become the advisor. Why you? Because there is no one else coming out to your location to do it. Along the Security or Enabling the ANSF LOO you are the enabler and principle executor. There is no embedded training team (ETT) on the way and the expectation from COMISAF down the chain of command to your battalion commander is that you now fill that role. It is your responsibility to train with, assist, advise, and professionalize your ANSF counterpart. Here is the beauty of this opportunity: it enables you to professionalize your own soldiers, which you will begin to see with the implementation of these recommendations. Again we revisit the CF standard and the Afghan standard. They are not the same and you will probably not get the ANSF to the CF standard at every location - but you can try. There are some additional dynamics that you must understand as you begin the difficult journey of getting outside of your comfort zone and become an advisor.

ANSF dynamics that you must understand:

- There is no formalized NCO Corps (as we would understand it) in the Afghan Army. However, there are NCO development programs being created and run at several locations.
- Afghans from the same family, village, or tribe often serve in the same units. What this may cause is the tribal or familial hierarchy interfering with the rank structure as well as the good order and discipline within the unit. There can be positive effects to these ties, however.
- ANSF leadership at your level appears to have no leverage through an Afghan Uniformed Code of Military Justice (UCMJ) that provides discipline in the force.
- Some ANSF units are comprised of or have personnel from the local area. Use them to build relations.
- Some ANSF units have both Dari only and Pashtun only speakers. So, when you teach a class you are going to need to have an interpreter that can speak and understand both languages.
- The ANSF sense of leadership structure is not our model. At your level, analyze the situation and try to get the right structure in place first. This will decrease your level of frustration.

- A factor to consider is that in some cases, Afghans have purchased their leadership positions, whether qualified or not (as was common in Europe centuries ago). In some cases, it is simply a money making issues through corruption which you will have to manage.

Below are some recommendations you can use to focus your efforts while enabling the ANSF:

Training.

“Training is NCO business.” So, get after it and make it personal. Translate how you yourself, your men, the fire team, the squad and the platoon are expected to perform to your ANSF counterpart.

- **Ensure you train with the ANSF** element in order to build the necessary relationships and camaraderie. Mistakes made by ISAF in the past have often been related to whether or not Coalition forces trained with their ANSF counterparts
- **Set the ANSF force structure** as close as you can to your own; for example: organize them into a platoon with matching squads, teams, and specialty skills (medics and mortarmen). This is the leadership’s responsibility up through the battalion level to influence and persuade the ANSF counterpart of the importance of the war fighting force structure. This directly applies to the ANA.
- **Task organize** your platoon to take responsibility of a like-sized element. This pairing of like-sized elements maintains the appropriate levels pertaining to their sphere of influence and span of control. It also breaks down the problem set into manageable pieces.
- **Communicate with your partners.** The platoon leader and platoon sergeant must dialogue with the partnered ANSF element to establish a similar task organization and assist in the development of an executable training schedule.

Things to take into consideration in order to build an effective training plan:

- **Prayer times.** Training with the ANSF will allow you to better plan for this during the conduct of operations. You will also build a relationship of trust and understanding. Research through an interpreter or ANSF Mullah if praying five times a day applies during military or combat operations. Missing a prayer time may be acceptable on some occasions. Also, understand that there are time windows they can pray within.
- **ANSF working times.** Afghans are tied to the sun not the clock. They may start their day at sunrise; and in the late spring and summer that could equate to 0430-ish local. Plan accordingly.

- **ANSF training.** Identify what ANSF training they are already required to attend or execute; which includes religious training. Don't let it come as a surprise.
- **Provide a list of training tasks and events.** Do not assume they know what they need to be training on and don't force training on them. Get their buy-in.
- **Training schedules allow you to be predictable.** Stop making the same mistakes and blaming the ANSF. If you haven't included them in the process then it is your fault.
- Do what you do with your own unit, with the ANSF, because it works. If your unit links up prior to actual training events then link up with them prior to actual training events. They may not have a solid concept of time.
- Utilize the normal training techniques that you use to train your own unit. It worked for you and it will definitely work for your ANSF counterpart.

Recommended Steps for building the plan:

- Validate what the previous Coalition unit achieved by assessing the unit you are partnering with. You need to know at what level they are operating. It doesn't need to be a formal evaluation, but you should look at their overall level of performance. Run them through some basic battle drills, because the enemy is not going to wait until you are ready. Know and understand your counterpart's capabilities and limitations before you leave the wire. You do the same thing with your unit. Platoons, squads, and fire teams are evaluated so the leadership knows and understands the capabilities and limitations of his assets.
- If you need to, show them what right looks like.
- Once the assessment is complete, identify the performance shortfalls that need to be addressed and prioritize them.
- Develop a methodical training program of instruction (POI) and, as mentioned before, get your ANSF counterpart involved. Get the necessary buy-in. Make it their plan and be patient, but do your best not to get side tracked.
- Training starts at the fire team level in order to manage training and expectations up front. This allows you to demonstrate discipline and camaraderie at the lowest level. It also allows the identification of strong and weak performers. In addition, you can build upon training from the individual to collective unit - and training can be customized based on earlier results.
- A training methodology to use is the CRAWL – WALK – RUN. Again, the Afghan level of "Good Enough" is not the CF level. Get them to their level and realize that you may be executing CRAWL – CRAWL – CRAWL for an extended period of time. If they get

to the level that you have established as a goal, then continue to raise the standard. Avoid complacency.

- Do not over complicate training and do not get into the minute details, because you will lose their attention rapidly. It is the same considerations we take into account when we train. Know your audience and present the material at that level.
- **Afghans like to be challenged.** They will perform at a higher level if they are competing against fellow soldiers and units. Breaking the formation into manageable subunits will enable you to create a healthy level of competitiveness between these units. This will increase their level of interest and willingness to train.
- **Afghans like to be recognized in front of their peers** – you can probably relate. Present “Certificates of Recognition” or “Commendations” such as ANA soldier, ANP patrolman, or team of the week in front of an organized formation. This will bolster performance.
- **Identify ANSF for a train the trainer course (T3C) or instructor training course.** This will further accelerate their professionalization.
- **Select Assistant Instructors.** Utilize their personnel as soon as possible to act as assistant instructors (AIs) and build confidence.
- **Give them the responsibility to conduct training when they are ready.** Step back and start to advise. You should still maintain a level of interaction, but they should begin to drive the training and operations within the AO.

Their ability to successfully conduct unilateral operations equates to mission success. You have just enabled the ANSF.

Developing.

The “so what” regarding enabling the ANSF is that it allows you to develop your soldiers, privates, specialists, and junior NCOs by having them teach classes as primary instructors (PI) on basic infantry tasks while utilizing the team leaders and squad leaders as assistance instructors (AI). This will enable you to professionalize your soldiers and build your own platoon capabilities. Soldiers understand and learn things more rapidly by teaching, coaching, and mentoring. It will bolster their individual confidence and stature having personally taken part in building another nation’s Army. In addition, they will foster relationships, camaraderie, and know the capability of the ANSF elements they will undoubtedly fight alongside in the trenches, orchards, and open fields outside of their COPs.

Partnering.

Combined Action, partnering, and embedded partnering all mean the same thing at the platoon level. You have to live on the same COP, train together, and conduct operations together. As outlined throughout this paper, it involves a little more than that. Which you have already seen, may see, or may not see at all, because this is not a training event or exercise. You are dealing with real people, and real places with real dynamics that change day in and day out from location to location. You are the subject matter expert (SME) in your area and about your area and you “paint the picture” for the higher echelons of command.

Governance and Development

As intimated, your unit may not be well positioned to take the lead in Governance and Development. The key to your success is identifying the help you need and knowing where to find it.

Civil Affairs.

This asset can assist you in conducting village assessments, identifying the actual needs of the populace (versus projects that favor one group over another), and identify and link you up with other development assets that may be working in your AO.

Civilian Team.

The US Government has deployed thousands of civilian experts to Afghanistan; engineers, police experts, agricultural experts, city planners and more. The point is you can ask for their assistance if you plan ahead.

Information Operations

Information Operations can magnify your successes or your failures. You must master this LOO – and know that you are competing with the enemy for dominance of the Information space.

Influence.

Every interaction you have with an Afghan influences them in one way or another. So when you interact be aware that you are leaving an impression. Make the interaction count.

PSYOP.

They show up, walk with you and leave cool products behind. That is not all they can do. Get them to tell you how to engage those you need to influence. They study the populace and the enemy. Get some ideas you can use when you interact with the populace. If your platoon owns a COP ask them to develop a PSYOP program for your AOR and then execute it. And note: sometimes, just listening to the villagers will provide you with techniques to use.

Final Thoughts

The success of the mission here in Afghanistan is based on the actions of the company and platoons operating at the COPs. The development of the ANSF and the results of your hard work will not be seen overnight. ANSF progression will be measured along milestones and be observed over time. Your challenges and levels of frustration are understood at all echelons of command. They are trying to identify the problem sets and provide solutions as quickly as possible, but some bureaucratic issues still weigh in and have a vote. The key to your continued success is your ability to adapt, manage expectations, be a problem solver, and continue to move forward - however long it takes. Nations are not built overnight and you are currently involved in the building of the Afghan Nation. In the COIN environment your greatest weapon isn't the ordnance you can drop or the tools of warfare, but rather your mind and the relationships you establish.

Best of Luck!