

The Counterinsurgency Cliff Notes: Techniques for the Conventional Rifle Platoon, in Layman's Terms

by

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There are many books, manuals, and articles that define strategies and principles for counterinsurgency (COIN) success. No one author is completely right and no one is completely wrong; they all have great information and tools to add to your arsenal. This document is not a complete lesson on counterinsurgency theory and strategy, but is rather a collection of counter-insurgent and counter-guerrilla techniques that the author believes are relevant to the current fight in Iraq. This paper is written with an intended primary audience of Rifleman through Platoon Leader, though the information is applicable to company-level leadership as well. Remember that these are only techniques learned by one Infantry platoon in a specific place (central Iraq) at a specific time (June '06 to Sept '07). The decision to adopt and implement these techniques is entirely yours. However, using techniques specifically aimed at counter-insurgency and counter-guerrilla warfare is critical to supporting your Commander's greater strategy. While it is true that every AO is different, the overarching COIN principles will apply anywhere. You just have to figure out the finer tactical means of employing them; and that is where this paper will help you out.

Your COIN fight starts long before you deploy. An easy way to begin is to select a few good articles or books and have all the senior leaders in your platoons and company read them. One good example is "[Twenty-Eight Articles](#)," by Dr. David Kilcullen. He writes an excellent paper on company-level ops. Get together once a week and have an informal discussion on what you read. The goal is to come together on a Company COIN strategy. This is not an absolute set of rules to live by but it puts everyone on the same page, will help you task organize, and gives leaders a common language to collaborate in. A good company commander will guide this process but the platoon leaders and XO can spearhead it just as effectively. This process should start at least two months out from deployment, hopefully sooner. By that time the reality of deployment has hit and leaders have that extra bit of focus and motivation. If you are lucky you will also know which region you will be operating in.

Boots on the ground. You should be out on foot in your AO every time you roll out of the wire. Of course you may have to drive to get there, but you can't conduct any business from

behind your “Pope-glass” (bullet-proof glass arrayed around the hatch of a tactical vehicle). Not only will you miss many of the ever-changing physical details of your AO, but you will alienate the local populace. Be known as the friendly, professional soldier (which can only be achieved face to face) versus the occupier (mobbing through the neighborhood in a Bradley).

Learn the language. The platoon leader will usually have an interpreter, but the soldiers are going to be the first ones into a house and must have a basic understanding of the language. Have your interpreter teach you a short list of phrases like “hello, we are conducting a routine search” and “do you have any weapons in the house?” to make your sudden presence less intimidating and intrusive to the locals. Of course once you have security established you will use the interpreter to go more in depth.

Every time you patrol, learn and record as much information as you can. If you spend time in someone’s house you should leave knowing every relevant piece of information on that family. What is relevant is something you will have to figure out on your own and it may take a few weeks. Here are a few subjects that are probably relevant most anywhere in present-day Iraq:

Names: Always get the complete name. The Arabic naming convention includes a lot of information. The family name is very important because different families have different allegiances and connections. Same thing for their tribe.

Sunni or Shiite: Many will be hesitant to answer. Work it into your conversation in an inquisitive, non-threatening manner. Many times your interpreter will be able to determine this by their dress or the religious artifacts they have displayed in their home. Your soldiers can learn these indicators fairly quickly. This information is important because of the highly volatile sectarian violence that is occurring in Iraq. Tracking the religious make-up of your AO and how it changes over time will be a good indicator of the current state of sectarian violence.

How long have they lived in that house? In one neighborhood in Baghdad, for example, there was a mix of long-time residents and recent move-ins. The long-time residents were mostly (but not completely) not involved in insurgent activity and were generally more willing to give information. However, the recent move-ins were either militia members or were displaced from another area due to sectarian violence. Finding where these recent move-ins came from and why they moved can tell you how locals perceive your AO and what is going on in the surrounding areas. Cross-check this information with their neighbors to see who is being truthful and who has something to hide.

What is their relationship with the local authorities (IP/IA)? Do they like them? Do they trust them? Are they around and do they keep the neighborhood safe? If the locals have issues with the local authorities or are scared of them they will most likely tell you. Most Iraqi’s still view the U.S. soldiers as the supreme authority. While we need to change this attitude by helping to mold the local authorities into a more legitimate force, it is what it is. You can sometimes learn more from the locals about the IA/IP than from your visits to IA/IP compounds.

What do they do for a living? This question will reveal a whole world of information to you. It will teach you about the local economy, unemployment rates, the municipal structure, and the types of assets the locals have available to them, such as ice factories and gasoline.

You will get this information best through conversation, not direct questioning (though at times it may come to that). Learn what is important to the local populace and use that to start genuine conversations. Even if you don't really care, you need to pretend like you do for those 10 or 15 minutes that you are engaging that Local National. It will result in you gaining the situational understanding and intel that you need to accomplish your mission.

Have specific systems in place for recording information. Notepads and digital cameras are essential, but other devices such as helmet cameras, vehicle cameras, and simple voice recorders will greatly enhance your recording capabilities. Think back to your glory days of high school football; what did you do the day after the game? You watched film. It is important in combat for the same reasons; you won't catch everything with your own eyes in the heat of the moment. Video is also a great AAR tool to use after significant events. Save every video and picture you take in an organized system on a reliable computer. Take the time to name every file with a descriptive, easy-to-understand title.

Become an expert on your AO. You have to know the area better than the insurgents. Know every street, alley, building, and all the key players. Key players are not just government officials and local leaders, but also the families that occupy buildings that you consider to be key terrain. Become their friends (or at least pretend like you are). Make it seem as if you are talking to them because you enjoy it and not because you must. Those random drop-ins to key players are often just a cover for another objective, such as getting one of your squad leaders to the rooftop to check out the fields of fire or figuring out how to gain entry quietly in the middle of the night for a Small Kill Team (SKT).

Knowing the layout of the streets and buildings will allow you to out-maneuver the enemy in a firefight. Spend time studying the imagery of your AO and identify all of the vehicle and foot routes. Use this information to track how often you use each route and never set a pattern. ***Never leave your AO the same way you went in.***

Learn the actual Arabic names of the streets and neighborhoods. The locals and the police won't know what "Route Blue" and "Route Michigan" are. They will relate information and directions with their own street names. Go to the local police station, point at their wall-map, and ask the names of each major street. It's too easy. It is ten minutes of work that will make you much more effective. Put this near the top of your to-do list as soon as you get in your AO. Even learning the English interpretation will suffice if you always have an interpreter, but make the effort to learn the Arabic versions if you have the time.

Define the enemy. The violence and destruction that is occurring in your sector is not always the work of one unified insurgent group. Foreign fighters, insurgents, and criminals are a few types of enemy. Foreign fighters are generally hard-core, religiously-motivated, and highly

trained. Foreign fighters are often trained as snipers and bomb-makers and will seek out the sanctuary of a mosque for shelter and support. Insurgent groups are mostly composed of local Iraqis and have goals with a political end state. Criminals are just that- local thugs. Iraq is ruled by mafia-type organizations that sometimes form around families, tribes, or neighborhoods and take advantage of the relative lawlessness to make money. Their actions may not be directed at you but will affect your AO significantly. Know who your enemy is and isn't and treat them accordingly.

Use minimum force. Basically, try not to break stuff or kill anyone you don't have to. Armored vehicles can destroy a tight neighborhood. In many low-income areas the water lines are buried only inches under the ground and your heavy vehicle will crush them. Power lines are often hung low and your .50 will rip them down. An inattentive driver can knock down walls, telephone poles, and destroy cars. The bottom line is that you are going to alienate all of your would-be sources. If you have to go on foot, just do it. If the neighborhood is that tight, you probably won't be able to maneuver your vehicles in a fire-fight anyway.

You may also have to cut a lot of padlocks to get into courtyards and buildings. Your S-4 can purchase padlocks locally and you can keep replacements in your truck. It's not a perfect solution but it is better than nothing.

Focus on gaining intel. Killing the enemy during a fire-fight is great, but catching him in your covert ambush before he even knows you are there is so much more satisfying (and safe!). This requires *getting inside the enemy's planning cycle* and *knowing his next move* before he makes it. Yes, this will require a lot of sneaky-sneaky OP operations, but there are so many more assets that you can take advantage of to do the work for you. Your S-2 will be able to tell you what SIGINT assets, interrogation databases, and other sources are available in your area. Use them! You would be amazed at how under-utilized many of our most advanced assets are. And when you track these people down and show interest in their program, they will be happy to show you what they have to offer and will support your missions.

A little time spent on the SIPR net searching databases can also provide you with a lot of useful information and analysis that others have already done for you. Additionally, there is a lot of grunt detective work to be done in your AO. If you get a lead, follow it. Have that local come with you and point out what he was talking about. Every piece of intel is going to help you better understand the big picture. Some leaders have even purchased cell phones at the local market so that their tactical sources could call them directly, day or night.

If you have an IED cell operating in your area, you need to be targeting the cell, not just developing new TTP's to deal with IED encounters. What is their motivation? Who do they target and why? What kind of patterns are they setting? How do they move through the neighborhoods? What is the local national sentiment towards them? Where do they live (not always local)? A single SKT may take weeks to plan, but if you have done your homework than your chances of killing or capturing bad guys are much higher. Always update and review your target packets to keep you on track and focused. And as a final note on intel, it is

always better to *capture* than *kill*. The intelligence that you will gather from that insurgent is far more valuable than simply eliminating him from the earth. As part of your SKT plan, see if you can put a fire team on the first floor of a building near your engagement area as a “snatch-and-grab” team.

Improve the neighborhood. After you have been in your AO for a while you will have a good idea of the issues. Pick one that is both realistic and will have a positive, visible impact on the area and work on it as you can. Remember that you are just a platoon, so “building a new grammar school” probably isn’t a feasible objective. Perhaps it is something as simple as increasing the local police presence into your neighborhood. You can start by building a relationship with the police, then start doing combined patrols, and then finally establish a permanent police presence with patrols and a checkpoint or police station. Of course this is just an example; in some areas the police may be of a different ethnicity or religion and be committing genocide. In that case you may want to try a different angle. Never forget to communicate your intentions and progress reports to the local populace. If you don’t know where to start, focus on the essential services such as water, power and sewer. They should be at the top of your list. Request the support assets that are attached to your battalion such as civil affairs and psy-ops and leverage your S-4 to enlist local contractors.

Never forget how important your interpreter is in the COIN fight. Without an interpreter, you would be hard pressed to accomplish much of the above. You must build a relationship with your interpreter. Ensure that your interpreter understands what you expect of him. If you are speaking calmly, he should speak calmly. If you are yelling and trying to put the fear of god in some poor individual, your interpreter should be doing the same. He/she must convey not only the subject matter but the feeling and inflection in your voice. Give them a good initial counseling and make sure they understand their role.

Make your interpreter feel like part of the team. They are probably already getting paid a healthy amount, but make sure that they are getting to meals, going on leave when authorized, getting escorted to the PX when necessary and available, and are being treated well (most ‘terps are not!). Give them a pair of ACU’s to wear and a unit patch. If your interpreter enjoys working with you, he/she will yield so much more intel than just interpreting words. A local interpreter can read if someone is lying much better than you can, they can tell you the background and affiliations of the local tribes and families, they can help you focus your questioning to relevant topics, they can help control civilians when things get hectic, and they can teach you a lot about local customs and the norms of society.

Balance security with civilian interaction. A lot of units never grasp the concept of Local National engagement because it puts them in the open and vulnerable to the enemy. There is some truth to this, but there is also an easy solution. Let’s say that you want to stop by the local market and talk to the locals. No problem, simply plan it as if you were conducting a raid. Have a planned infil and exfil route. Have an overwatch position. Have the big guns on your vehicles lock down the high speed avenues of approach. And have a time limit. At that point you have pretty much done everything you can at the platoon level to secure yourself. You now have some relative freedom to have a squad with the PL and interpreter walk into the market and gain some intel and build rapport with the locals. Use your interpreter while a

few soldiers buy cigarettes and Pepsi. To the locals it just looks like you parked your vehicles and jumped out to talk, but you have the whole street locked down. The same actions should be taken when searching a house, stopping by the police station, or enjoying a cup of chai with the local sheik.

Tactical Patience; Avoid emotional responses to an operational event. Some very unfortunate things are going to happen in a war zone. In an insurgency this is often a baited situation aimed at creating an emotional, overblown response from the counterinsurgent (you) that creates a lot of civilian collateral damage. If you don't know who to blame and kill or capture, wait until you do. Knee-jerk reactions waste energy, effort, and are in most cases counterproductive to COIN strategy.

Always have a Task and Purpose. Every time you leave the wire you should have a specific task to accomplish. Have a specific plan and route. Once that task is complete, you are done. If you have multiple tasks to accomplish then plan accordingly and do them one after another. DO NOT conduct time-standard patrolling. Many units use this technique and leave platoons out of the wire for as much as eight hours at a time with no plan. As soon as you are wandering around the AO aimlessly with no planned objective or route, you will die. Yes, that sounds extreme and blunt, but it is the truth. If you do not plan your routes then you will begin to set patterns whether you realize it or not. And then you will get blown up or shot.

Use and rehearse your SOPs. Having SOP's will allow you to accomplish your task quickly and safely. One of the most common things you will do is clear and conduct Sensitive Site Exploitation (SSE) on a house. Here is an example of a platoon SOP for that task:

- Squad 1: Breach and clear courtyard.
- Squad 2: Clear 1st floor and secure detainees.
- Squad 3: Clear second floor, establish rooftop security (if at night; use the top-floor windows in the day) and push detainees down to the first floor.
- Weapons Squad is augmenting vehicle security.
- Squad 2 has 1st floor security and detainee handling.
- Squad 1 is the SSE squad and conducts the search, to include the courtyard. Squad 3 can help search the 2nd floor if they have enough personnel.
- Interpreter #1 records each person's name while the RTO takes their pictures. Write and photograph in the same order so when you download the pictures later you just fill in the names in order of your 'terps notepad (saves time on the objective). If you don't have two interpreters, any soldier can accomplish this task with a few basic Arabic phrases.
- PL with interpreter #2 is conducting the specific questioning.
- SSE squad collects intel and contraband, takes pictures, grids, and notes, and informs the PL/PSG of anything significant. The in-depth write-up and collaboration can be done back at the base. Do anything you can to minimize time-on-target.

You can adjust to your own task organization, but by using an SOP such as this you can enter, clear, and SSE an entire house in 20 minutes. You can hit the target house first and

then the houses on either side if you came up with nothing (which happens often). Thus, you can collect vital information on three entire households within an hour, allowing more time for the numerous other tasks that you need to accomplish. And this applies when you go in “soft” as well. Use the same SOP but with a smile on your face and by ringing the doorbell. It takes practice but SOPs such as this will save time and lives. The most important benefits of SOPs are that it alleviates excessive radio traffic and nothing will be overlooked.

That probably sounds pretty simple. Well, it has to be. We are infantrymen, not rocket scientists. If you can work those techniques into your mission planning every day you will be leaps and bounds ahead of most deployed units. It’s not perfect and it’s not all-inclusive, but it’s something that any platoon can wrap their brains around and execute. The finer tactical points are going to depend on the specific enemy situation in your AO and your own capabilities. Remember that AO’s are fluid environments that can change in weeks, days, and even minutes. It is critical that you continuously assess your COIN strategy and it’s effectiveness in your AO. You can integrate a “COIN leadership huddle” into your company targeting meetings (usually weekly) to facilitate this process.

Embrace counterinsurgency. It is not the cut and dry direct action fight that we all trained for. It is a thinking man’s game. You must outsmart your enemy. Do not get discouraged when you do not see immediate results. Some areas will be more resistant than others. This is not a reason to write the AO off as a lost cause. You just have a lot of work to do. Start small, start safe. Changing the dynamic of a neighborhood takes time.

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FOR FURTHER READING

A language tool that you can download right to your computer or iPod:

<http://fieldsupport.lingnet.org/>

Twenty-Eight Articles, by Dr. David Kilcullen:

<http://smallwarsjournal.com/documents/28articles.pdf>

Please send any comments, suggestions, or questions to craig.coppock@us.army.mil

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