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Advising in Small Wars

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Zachary Griffiths

On July 31st 2013, the Taliban killed thirteen of my Afghan police partners. *The New York Times* described the “charred remains of vehicles smoldering on the road” left behind by retreating Afghan forces.^[i] The Secretary of Defense read my situation report. How should an advisor best support his partner when 10% of their force is killed? While neither General Anthony Zinni or Dr. David Kilcullen discuss what it means to be a good advisor in detail, General Zinni does note the importance of *restoring key institutions as early as possible*.

In three sections, this paper explores how my Special Forces detachment restored the Nangarhar Provincial Response Company (PRC), a special operations element of the Afghan police, by fusing General Zinni’s considerations and Dr. Kilcullen’s fundamentals of small wars.^[ii] The first section describes effects of a catastrophic loss on both the force and province. The second section explains how my detachment forced Afghan and coalition forces to *recognize* the PRC’s losses, *reconstituted* the PRC with internally- and externally-focused efforts, and finally *restored* their confidence with progressively tougher combat operations. In the third and final section, I reflect on two regrets from this experience and offer some concluding remarks.

Good advisors rebuilt the PRC with trust earned through shared sweat and combat. Neither the small war fundamentals nor considerations explain how to be a good advisor. The Institute for National Strategic Studies codified the strategic lessons of our wars in Iraq and Afghanistan in *Lessons Encountered: Learning from the Long War*. Though *Lessons Encountered* takes a high-level view of those conflicts, Colonel Hammes strikes center-of-mass in his chapter *Raising and Mentoring Security Forces in Iraq and Afghanistan* when he describes local security forces as “our ticket home.”^[iii] Small wars are tough and human; advisors need committed relationships with their partners if we are to succeed.

Tragedy

Unlike most Special Forces in Afghanistan that partnered detachments directly with their Afghan partners, my detachment was part of the allied special operations task force. My task force partnered American Special Forces detachments with allied special operations detachments with the goal of developing interoperable special operations forces. Task Unit Nangarhar, which I commanded from June 2013 to February 2014, was composed of American and Hungarian soldiers who trained, advised, and assisted the Nangarhar PRC to build enduring tactical, operational, and institutional capacity.^[iv] Neither Task Unit Nangarhar nor the PRC had any mission other than to improve the PRC’s tactical and institutional

capabilities, and combat the insurgency. Our goal was an independent PRC that weakened the insurgency through deliberate operations based on Afghan intelligence and targeting.

When we arrived in June 2013 the situation was bleak. A suicide attack against the PRC base the previous March had left the unit operationally ineffective. No one was killed, but the attack caused coalition leaders to move the Task Unit advisors to Jalalabad Airfield – a more secure base – while their Afghan counterparts remained stationed amongst the wreckage of their headquarters.

The Nangarhar PRC should have been the keystone of provincial security. By Afghan doctrine, they are the Provincial Chief of Police's most elite force. They exist to target and arrest insurgents and criminals too tough or in places too rough for the regular police.^[v] The paramilitary PRC conduct high-risk SWAT-style arrests and quick reaction operations to support checkpoints under attack. Demoralized from the attack and advisor abandonment, the PRC chased bicycle thieves and protected mid-level officials. After a month of training however, the PRC found their footing. Participation in a large cordon and search operation restored their morale and built trust with us, their new advisors. Then, tragedy struck.

Field Manual 3-90-1 defines defeat as a “task that occurs when an enemy force has temporarily or permanently lost the physical means or the will to fight.”^[vi] The Taliban defeated the PRC on 31 July when they killed 13 patrolmen during a high-risk operation in the foothills of the infamous Tora Bora mountains. Though as an organization the PRC still had ninety men and eleven trucks, two days of isolation under Taliban fire destroyed their morale.

Worse, during the intense fighting with mounting casualties their supposed partners – my Task Unit – had not come to their aid. Despite phone calls, emails, and radio chatter, higher only provided permission for us to move forward 43 kilometers to the Khugyani district center where a police relief force was rallying. There, the deputy chief of police begged us to escort them 10 to 15 kilometers forward to relieve the isolated PRC. Unfortunately, no one knew their exact location. With higher fearing ambush, we were again denied permission to help. The next day, the Afghan Army rescued the broken remnants of the PRC platoon.



Figure 1. Still Image of an Ambushed PRC Ranger Truck From a Taliban Video[vii]

When we finally met the rescued PRC patrolmen, I saw our rapport burned along with their Ranger trucks (Figure 1). “Green-on-blue” hung in the air as we met them and my medic checked over the wounded. In the weeks following the attack, the broken PRC collapsed. Their commander visited our camp several times with disheartening reports: nearly half the force had deserted. Morale was destroyed.

Start or Restore Key Institutions as Early as Possible

General Zinni situates *start or restore key institutions* about halfway through his list of small war fundamentals just below “culture’s importance” and above “losing momentum.” Based on our cultural awareness, we developed a plan to avoid lost momentum with three phases: *recognition* of the problem, *reconstitution*, and *restoration* of confidence. With the ultimate goal of an independent and capable PRC, each requirement leaned on the proceeding requirement. The PRC’s mission required them to strike against the insurgency. Those operations required trained manpower and equipment. Restored manpower and equipment required both Afghans and the coalition to recognize the problem.

Recognition

From our *thorough mission analysis* and aggressive schedule of introductions, we knew where to fire our red star clusters. Before we returned to our base, we let the world know how bad the situation was. Repeating “10% of the force killed, 50% desertion, and total loss of rapport with detachment” in daily reports and phone calls focused everyone’s attention. The effects of the reporting were immediate and from the very top of our organization. The American SOF commander in Afghanistan made an exception-to-policy authorizing American-funded martyr payments for the PRC’s fallen. Our task force’s partnership officers pushed the Afghan logistics and personnel systems to prioritize deployment of new patrolmen, new vehicles, and new weapons to the PRC. While this was progress, a few hundred bucks and a pat on the back from the partners who abandoned you do not buy back trust.

To restore the morale of force, we helped the PRC organize a memorial ceremony. High-level Afghan recognition from the Deputy Governor, the Provincial Imam, and the Provincial Chief of Police heartened the remaining patrolmen and repaired lost rapport. Martyr payments were distributed before the memorial ceremony, ensuring family members would be present. The ceremony closed with groundbreaking on a permanent memorial to remember the fallen patrolmen. The ceremony was successful. Replacement patrolmen and equipment began to flow in. Deserters returned to the force.

Reconstitution

We undertook a dual-pronged internal/external effort to reconstitute the PRC knowing we would need both if the PRC were coming back. Internally, detachment members trained the PRC and examined their internal capabilities. Externally, we built relationships. We also organized for interagency operations finding that interagency operations are to counter-insurgency as combined arms are to maneuver warfare – the best way to win. This approach incorporated at least five small wars fundamentals and considerations, outlined below.

Be Careful Whom You Empower

Drill sergeants, jumpmasters, and Green Berets exude confidence because they are masters of their craft. A new Sergeant Major fresh from the Crisis Response Unit – the most elite force of Afghan police – led our effort to build mastery in the PRC’s internal trainers. The PRC’s recovery period gave us an uninterrupted opportunity to develop non-commissioned PRC trainers because they could focus without breaking to prepare for operations. With the commander’s blessing, the detachment trained him and his

trainers on tactics and their special equipment – radios, night vision, maps, counter-improvised explosives training, and GPS systems. This training capacity proliferated advanced skills throughout the force, boosting confidence and morale.

Local Forces Should Mirror the Enemy, Not Ourselves

Despite success building an internal training system, we were unsuccessful in making our PRC more like the insurgents. Based on detachment experience from Iraq, we handpicked and trained seven patrolmen in plainclothes reconnaissance. They cased qalats, preparing detailed sketches highlighting access points, wall heights, and daily patterns of life. They learned the fundamentals of long-range surveillance with binoculars and cameras. Finally, they practiced blending into isolated communities.

Unfortunately, I did not communicate the intent of the training well enough to their commander. During their final evaluation, the reconnaissance team briefed their plan to reconnoiter a notional objective in plainclothes. The commander immediately rejected the small team plan as too dangerous and plainclothes operations as possibly illegal. In our drive to *organize for intelligence*, I failed to understand the personal and cultural roadblocks that would prevent adoption of these reconnaissance techniques.

Organize for Intelligence

The detachment also invested in Afghan intelligence production by tightening its relationship with the American former police investigators who trained and mentored the PRC's investigative arm. Rapid advisor turnover and minimal intelligence production had sidelined the investigators. However, more engaged advisors, detachment pressure, and Afghan interest restored their morale and increased output. Intelligence development is a long-term process, but restarting intelligence early led to three successful Afghan operations that captured insurgent weapons and ammunition.

Fortuitously, a new Hungarian detachment also arrived during the reconstitution period bringing a signals intelligence system. We had met this detachment during pre-mission training in Germany and were excited to have this experienced and competent force join us. Unlike the other systems in use before their arrival, the Hungarian system provided detailed signals intelligence analysis exclusively for our Task Unit. No longer forced to compete for scarce American signals intelligence resources, we increased our intelligence production to develop appropriate confidence operations for phase three of our restoration efforts.

Coordinate Everything With Everybody

As General Zinni advises in his ninth consideration, we coordinated everything with everybody. Though we'd already met with the battle space integrator we redoubled our rapport-building efforts. I participated in his weekly meetings, sent my intelligence sergeant to their intelligence meetings, and started attending the Brigade Commander's "SOF Shura" to disseminate our message across eastern Afghanistan. We also pressed the broader SOF community for support. Another Special Forces Company lent intelligence and some assault ladders, while also promising coordination on future Afghan operations. Meetings with other government agencies provided valuable intelligence and material support.

Outside of the Army, detachment engineer and weapons sergeants built a symbiotic relationship with the Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA) Foreign-Deployed Advisory and Support Teams (FAST). The DEA FAST partnered with Afghan national counter-narcotics police who had national authorities and independent intelligence collection. What the FAST did not have was permission to conduct operations unilaterally. National counter narcotics police warrants and intelligence would provide the basis for the PRC's first confidence building operations.

Organize for Interagency Operations

We also pushed the PRC to “coordinate everything with everybody” and reorganized them for Afghan interagency operations. During the PRC’s reconstitution period, the national special police headquarters sent each PRC a Colonel to raise unit stature. COL Mohmad Gul was new to Nangarhar and not interested in staying at the base and licking his wounds. Instead, he became the interagency face of the PRC.

Careful invitation of Afghan officers to the PRC memorial ceremony across the security forces opened the door to Afghan interagency coordination. As the PRC recovered and retrained, Colonel Gul pressed the flesh with everyone. Our meeting with the Afghan 2/4/203 Infantry yielded the promise of an Army support platoon on any operation in their area of operations. The Afghan Local Police in Shinwar, a prominent district in the province, secured roads for PRC searches. The provincial prosecutor dispatched prosecutors to assist PRC operations to protect the chain of custody and ensure operations were conducted legally. The national counter narcotics police provided intelligence and warrants for arrest operations.

Restore Confidence

Start easy and seek early victories

Only six weeks after losing 13 patrolmen to the Taliban, the PRC arrested a narcotics and insurgency financier on a pre-dawn raid that validated the interagency task organization and PRC’s new tactics. The PRC infiltrated under the cover of darkness, led by a source of the Afghan counter narcotics police. Afghan Army soldiers secured the outer cordon and egress route. With the target secure, the “cordon and knock” yielded the target without a shot fired. The provincial prosecutor ensured the operation was conducted legally. This operation revitalized the PRC; morale was restored. This blueprint – nighttime infiltration with door knock at dawn – provided the template for subsequent operations, both partnered and increasingly unilateral.



Figure 2. High Risk Award Badge

We cemented victory on confidence operations by awarding “high risk arrest” badges. Like Napoleon, my detachment knew “a soldier will fight long and hard for a bit of colored ribbon.” These badges celebrated the mettle of the patrolmen brave enough to face a midnight raid. The detachment wore them too; together we fought and earned the patches.

Engage the women

On target, we bumped into this fundamental from Dr. Kilcullen. Though our task force brought together the diverse resources and skills of eight allied nations, it did not bring the highly-trained women of the Cultural Support Teams. Ever resourceful, my detachment identified two military policewomen from the California National Guard who wanted to help. These women sought a break from setting speed traps for ATVs travelling faster than fifteen miles per hour around the base’s one-mile perimeter. They came on

target, searched female quarters, and talked to local women.

We were content with our innovation, but then the PRC one-upped us. Our military police women had *encouraged innovation and nontraditional responses* in the PRC. They brought out policewomen from the Nangarhar Police Headquarters and we were shocked. These women defied cultural stereotypes and were the best police in Afghanistan. They did not kick around clothes; they searched. They did not flip through books; they examined. Most importantly, they did not let local women get away with things – and they did not put up with shit from the male police either. Dr. Kilcullen says local forces should mirror the enemy, but here our mentorship pushed the PRC to be better than the enemy.

Be there

Confidence operations restored morale and combat rebuilt trust, but only vengeance would cement the PRC's confidence in themselves and us, their advisors. We took them back to Sherzad to face the men who killed their comrades. Afghan helicopters inserted us – the detachment, PRC, and counter-narcotics police – and awoke insurgents deep in their safe zone. Explosive destruction of two opium factories stirred the rest. Occasional insurgent popshots transitioned to steady rifle fire and then thudding machinegun rounds. The Taliban answered our helicopter mini-gun fire with their own heavy machineguns. AC-130 cannon fire ended the battle. We gave as good as we got. The PRC celebrated their victory and returned renewed.

Two Regrets

Despite our success in reconstituting PRC Nangarhar, I have two regrets: one related to information operations, and the other to Afghan combined after action reviews. Both General Zinni and Dr. Killcullen emphasize the importance of information in counterinsurgency using terms like dialogue, image, information management, psychological operations, and narrative. Our efforts to influence the Afghan and coalition leaders and bureaucrats succeeded: the PRC received necessary material and personnel. Important Afghan leaders came to their base and spoke of their sacrifice. However, the only Afghan media to cover their cause came from the Chief of Police who understood and used media. Building this capacity in the PRC Commander may have been impossible for cultural reasons, but I should have tried. The “good news story” of the PRC's reconstitution could have been followed across Nangarhar, improving the image and standing of the organization.

My second regret is that I did not conduct effective after action reviews with the PRC. Surprisingly, neither General Zinni's considerations nor Dr. Killcullen's fundamentals emphasize how we should teach our partners to learn. *Training Circular 25-20* specifies that after action reviews are “conducted during or immediately after each event” and repeatedly emphasizes the immediacy of successful reviews.[viii] If local forces are the long-term solution to security, we have a duty to help them reflect and learn. Thirteen kilometers separated the PRC from Jalalabad Airfield where my detachment lived. After twenty-four or forty-eight hours of continuous operations, we never took the time to stop in with our partners after an operation. Instead, we would meet with leaders the next day or days later to discuss successes and failures. Did our comments get down to the right rifleman? I doubt it. I knew this was wrong at the time, but my exhaustion overcame my desire to teach at those moments. Dig deep.

Conclusion

Setback is a dangerous way to think about challenges in insurgency. General Anthony Zinni and Dr. David Killcullen offer valuable insights into how we conduct insurgency at the tactical level – at least 20% of them fit the case I described. However, they neglect the human connection necessary to build and advise partners. The death of thirteen of my partners and desertion of their force was not a setback to be

managed, but a leadership challenge for my detachment and myself to overcome. Advisors in counter-insurgency need to be invested in growing partner capabilities so they can stand on their own. They also need to know when to take the reins.

When the PRC suffered their catastrophic losses, we got them back on track by *recognizing* their losses, *reconstituting* the force, and *restoring* their confidence. My detachment ensured everyone knew what the PRC needed to recover and made sure it was delivered. Reconstituting the force had internal and external components. Internally, my detachment retrained the PRC and reorganized them to conduct interagency operations. Though we reached outside the PRC initially to bolster their combat power, the lasting interagency orientation made PRC Nangarhar especially adept at counter-insurgency operations because they could leverage the strengths of their partners. Finally, we leaned on the one thing that can restore confidence in security forces after a setback: tactical operations. We provided those operations in spades – but carefully tailored each mission to ensure it built on the previous operation. Another big loss might have broken them for good.

The night in January I said goodbye to my footlockers and welcomed my replacement, the PRC captured insurgent weapons on a unilateral dawn raid based on intelligence from their own investigators. A prosecutor served a warrant and supervised the operation. The Police Chief issued a congratulatory message. The next night, the PRC did it again. The PRC, the wounded comrade we had been helping along, was now running on their own, our mission accomplished.

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End Notes

[i] Ahmed and Sahak, “Scores Killed in 2 Days of Clashes Between Afghan Police and Taliban Fighters.”

[ii] “Sharpen Those Pencils - 15 January Getting Danger Close | Small Wars Journal.”

[iii] Hooker Jr and Collins, “Lessons Encountered,” 277.

[iv] Douglas A. Livermore, “Green Berets Receive Awards for Valor at Battalion Ball.”

[v] ISAF Public diplomacy division, “Media Backgrounder: Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF).”

[vi] US Department of the Army, *FM 3-90-1: Offense and Defense*, 1:1–26.

[vii] “LiveLeak.com - Mujahidin Taking over Control of Sherzad District - Nangarhar 6 Aug.2013.”

[viii] US Department of the Army, “TC 25-20: After-Action Reviews,” 2.

About the Author



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