

# Developing Insight: Personal Anecdotes from OEF XIII

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*Insight — or the ability to see the situation as it really is — is the most valuable asset an advisor can have. Intellect alone does not guarantee insight. Soldierly virtues... are often not accompanied by insight. Insight comes from a willing openness... Self-doubt is essential equipment for a responsible officer in this environment; the man who believes he has the situation entirely figured out is a danger to himself and to his mission. — MG John H. Cushman<sup>1</sup>*

From February to August 2013, I had the privilege to serve as a member of a Security Force Advise and Assist Team (SFAAT), which deployed to Paktika Province, Afghanistan, with the 2nd Brigade Combat Team, 10th Mountain Division (2/10 MTN). My SFAAT's mission was to advise and assist the Afghan Border Police (ABP) amidst the larger drawdown of international presence from Afghanistan.

As a member of a SFAAT, I noticed many lessons learned have been published concerning advising methods, often without results.<sup>2</sup> I believe this is partly because little has been written on what understanding the operational environment — insight — looks like at the most personal level. To help bridge that gap, I first offer a summary of my advisory team's tour for context. Then, I share three of my experiences from Afghanistan and how I came to interpret them. My responses were specific to those situations, but I believe the questions that needed to be asked are universal.



Members of SFAAT Grey 1 and their notional Afghan Border Patrol counterparts question a role-player at an improvised traffic control point during training at the National Training Center, Fort Irwin, Calif., on 6 October 2012.  
(Photo by SSG Jennifer Bunn)

## Background

My SFAAT, Grey 1, was a team of 11 experienced NCOs and officers from different branches of the Army with a focus on training ABP units at the battalion level and higher. Prior to deployment, our training

included attending the SFAAT Academy at Fort Polk, La., and completing a National Training Center rotation (Fort Irwin, Calif.). Upon our deployment, we conducted operations as part of a Security Force Advisory Brigade (SFAB) and served as advisors to three ABP kandaks (battalions) during Operation Enduring Freedom XIII-XIV.

Grey 1 and its SFAB (2/10 MTN) were the last major coalition forces in the province; thus, retrograde operations were a high priority in addition to advising and assisting. Grey 1 fell under Task Force 2-14 Infantry, which served as an area of support coordinator (AOSC). The AOSC meant that Task Force 2-14 focused on providing assets and assisting Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF) rather than its own unilateral operations (as the battalions had done under the battlespace owner concept the previous year).

Grey 1 was attached to D Company, 2-14 IN, a heavy weapons Infantry company, with one platoon serving as our primary security force. Grey 1 shared its area of operations (AO) with two other light Infantry companies and two Afghan National Army (ANA) SFAATs, one of which operated out of the same forward operating base (FOB).

Grey 1 was the only SFAAT initially assigned to advise ABP in Paktika, and the location and distance of the three kandaks necessitated that Grey 1 conduct level 2 advising. This meant our team functioned as more of an information hub and conduit for the ABP, whereas an SFAAT operating at level 1 was more involved in the kandaks' day-to-day affairs. On average, we conducted two to four advising operations per month from late February to May. The pace slowed in late summer as Ramadan arrived and retrograde operations increased. These operations primarily consisted of air movements to the kandak headquarters. When we could not fly out to meet with the Afghan commanders in person, we had meetings with their liaisons on FOB Orgun-E every day except for Fridays. As the fighting season began, we increasingly worked as liaisons between the ABP and Task Force 2-14 to facilitate air support to ABP checkpoints under attack.

### **First Experience: I Don't Know What I Don't Know**

*In considering cultural awareness, SF (Special Forces) Soldiers must observe the first SOF (Special Operations Forces) imperative: Understand the operational environment. — Training Circular (TC) 31-73, Special Forces Advisor Guide*

In late summer 2013, roughly two-thirds of the way through the fighting season, the advising teams across Afghanistan received an extremely important task: formally assess their Afghan counterparts' job effectiveness using the Commander's Unit Assessment Tool (CUAT). This written assessment included both qualitative judgments, such as rating Afghan officers' leadership abilities, and more concrete data, such as the number of working vehicles compared to broken ones. The intent was that top-level commanders, Congress, and, ultimately, the President himself could decide how effective their strategy of creating an independent Afghan military and police force has been and then adjust accordingly.

When I first began work on that report, I thought I had a sufficient grasp of my uncertainties and the blind spots in my perspective and that I would be able to compensate for them. However, while working this report, I came to three major realizations that made me less than sure of that assumption.

The first realization was that we could not automatically trust the records we inherited. Changing and often vague guidance as to what constituted a rating in a CUAT distorted the records of our ABP kandaks' prior performance. For example, we rated how competent an Afghan unit was at patrols, but little criteria were given to define what made patrols successful. Turnover in Afghan personnel made clarity even harder to obtain.<sup>3</sup>

These inherited inaccuracies would then feed upon themselves. Especially at the beginning of the deployment, we relied on past CUATs to help show us what these Afghan units were like and how we should prioritize our efforts. With our first impressions already established from previous reports, we had a tendency to either confirm our biases or simply ignore issues in a unit because we incorrectly assumed it had been addressed. We then generated our own reports and assessments, continuing the cycle. This distortion of our records fed into my second realization.

My second realization was that extended observation time was even more critical to our accurate reporting than anticipated. One ABP unit that was far to the south and almost completely isolated from the Afghan command and support network dramatically showcased this. Previous teams had rated it highly, so early on we focused much of our effort on units that we believed would benefit more from our direct involvement. We kept in touch with this isolated unit through a single liaison, making occasional phone calls to help them with logistics issues and visiting a few times where we stayed less than a week. In reports to our superiors, we informed them that the southern unit was performing well; it just needed more supplies.

However, just before it was time to write our first CUAT as a team, we learned that the Afghan regional command fired most of the southern unit's leadership because of corruption charges. Besides gross negligence of duty in terms of maintaining their force, those officers were accused of embezzling hundreds of thousands of dollars in motor fuel from the local town. The Afghan commanding general of the region personally flew down to the unit with us, and we discovered a group that was dispirited and utterly untrained — a far cry from the professional, aggressive force presented by official records and the scripted facade we were shown during our brief visits.

Unfortunately, there was little to be done to improve the situation as our focus had shifted to the base handover, and we had little time and resources left to dedicate to the ABP unit in question. The short fly-ins and cellphone reporting had their place, but they could never fully substitute for extended time living with a rated unit. Our vision, our insight, and thus the vision and insight of decision makers throughout the region, had been clouded from the beginning by a combination of changes in reporting standards/criteria which we were not fully aware of as well as a shift in U.S. focus.

My third realization was how directly national-level politics affected our insight and our work. At the beginning of our deployment, President Obama publically announced in his February 2013 State of the Union address what many had speculated for months on — our withdrawal of troops from Afghanistan and the formal ending of our war there. This very public announcement had both obvious and subtle effects on our counterparts, and it inevitably affected their performance and level of engagement.

As an example, one of the commanders we advised seemed doubly motivated to train his men since he knew he would shortly lose U.S. combat support. This was wonderful, but that same commander also pointed out that more of his supplies were being stolen by the officers in charge of delivering them from Kabul. According to the commander, these other officers feared losing their jobs when the U.S. departed, so they were accumulating all they could. The prevalent uncertainty and mistrust at the national level led some ANSF unit commanders to either engage in additional graft or simply abandon villages to insurgents to conserve their resources for what they perceived as an inevitable drought in support and resurgence of enemy activity. In the case of this particular commander, his unit suffered losses in capability even though it had improved its own training and readiness.

Trying to figure out who was justifiably nervous and simply needed additional encouragement and who was genuinely corrupt became far more challenging. Units which had once been very active completely shut down their operations. It was difficult to gauge whether they were ineffective because of

leadership, quality of soldiers, lack of supplies, enemy actions, or they were they simply biding their time because they believed, correctly, that the Americans in Afghanistan had less leverage.

In the end, we completed two CUATs for each of the units for which we were responsible, but for all but one we added heavy caveats to ensure that our superiors knew we did not have a confident picture of our units in many areas. The lack of clarity in the evaluations created difficulty in determining how effective our efforts actually were, which made it hard to devise future strategy.

### **Reflection**

I believe that these experiences were examples of the imperatives to understand the operational environment and to continuously analyze assumptions. The difficulty lay in the operational environment's complexity and our relative inexperience in determining how on-the-ground effects correlated with seemingly far-off causes. The best remedy is that every member of the team, the larger unit, and the organization as a whole must keep an eye out for irregularities and be prepared to question what seems to be perfectly straightforward. Small unit leaders can make these efforts more effective by assigning personnel to study historical examples with similar conditions. They can also ensure there is someone assigned as a resident expert on areas they believe could have large impacts on their mission. As an example, several case studies of the Vietnam War would have revealed advisors struggling with the same reporting and evaluation criteria that we did, but an unofficial expert to assist the intelligence officer on fully understanding the political dimensions might have made it easier to determine how our Afghan partners would view international events.

### **Second Experience: What Do They Mean to Me?**

***Principle of Advising 2 — Empathy Leads to Understanding:*** Truly understanding other human beings and their motivations allows for the development of honest relationships, which is a critical factor of success.

***Principle of Advising 3 — Success Is Built Upon Personal Relationships:*** No amount of resources or firepower can compensate for a lack of relationship between advisor and FSF (foreign security forces) counterpart. It must be honest, genuine, and heartfelt. — **FM 3-07.10, Advising, Multi-service TTPs for Advising Foreign Security Forces**

It was a beautiful spring afternoon at FOB Orgun-E when I was startled from rest by an interpreter frantically pounding at the door: there had been an ambush and Afghan police were injured. "Where are they?" I asked. "They're here, sir. They brought them to the gate and they need help." I remember feeling the cold of adrenaline creeping along my spine because I also knew, at that moment, that there was a good chance I'd shortly be telling someone in a calm and caring way that we would not help. The reason for this: our strategy in Afghanistan was to push units towards independence after our withdrawal from the area.

At the time, I was serving as a liaison for my team while it was out on mission. I, alone, was the link between the team, our parent unit who manned the FOB and provided our security, and our Afghan partners who would drop by unannounced from a nearby police base. Unknown to me, an Afghan patrol from that nearby base had been ambushed, and four men suffered severe shrapnel wounds. They drove the wounded straight to us through some very difficult roads because they knew we could provide better treatment than the local hospital. They called my interpreter and were waiting anxiously at the gate. My interpreter was an easygoing man with more patrol time than many Soldiers, and when he came to get me, he was genuinely panicked. We both sprinted back to the gate so I could get the truck through the security. By this time, I had already notified our command center and received the sympathetic but stern warning that we might not be able to evacuate them.

I found the truck easily and with it, my fellow liaison with the ABP, Makhbul. He was visibly agitated and immediately said the men had been hurt and that they'd die without our help. At this time, our medical rules of engagement (ROE) were running through my head. We kept a little flowchart sitting in our radio room which was a replica of what our aid station had, neatly delineating who to help and when. As I worked out the shivering nausea of my adrenaline and the wounded groaned in the back of a pickup truck, I thought of three things: I needed to work through this as quickly as possible; it was probably not going to end well; and I needed to keep Makhbul and the men he would inevitably talk to later from seeing any of this as the Americans acting against them.

At this point, I did not at all feel compassion, concern, or grief. I was too much into problem-solving mode. My own feelings would come later. However, both Makhbul and the interpreter were full of grief, concern, and what looked like the beginnings of anger. Based on our collective training and my own reading, I knew they were a very emotive people so I made a point of putting my hands on Makhbul's shoulders, looking him in the eye, and telling him that I would do everything I could. I hoped to establish quickly that I was on their side. It was key that I actually meant what I said.

Together, we led the truck up to the aid station where the lead surgeon could look them over. He was very sympathetic and clearly wanted to help, but in the end procedure dictated he make his own assessment. It ended up being classified as life threatening but not immediately so under the guidelines. After a phone call, the brigade commander decided that we would not treat them. I personally talked with my chain of command and laid out the case for why treatment should be given, pointing out the likely results and how this could be a crucial gesture in building our relationship so early in the deployment. In the end, though, the decision remained to not evacuate the Afghans to a more advanced care facility. Instead, the surgeon provided some initial treatment and then offered to be on call to the local hospital in case the surgeon there needed further assistance.

I immediately went back outside to let Makhbul know and proceeded to help get the truck back out as fast as possible. Later, I made a point at showing visible anger and tried to direct the ire towards the Taliban for causing the injuries in the first place and the nebulous "orders" which constrained us. I spoke about how one of the wounded could well have been my younger brother living back in the United States. In retrospect, this could have backfired on either me or a later unit. However, my reading of his feelings ended up being correct. Also, because the Afghans' use of many Soviet techniques of command, the concept of an absolute order was one he was very familiar with.

Makhbul and the interpreter were both disappointed that day, but the initial treatment provided by the U.S. forces on the base helped maintain positive opinions of the advisors and our fellow units. In later incidents, we (U.S. and the other coalition forces) would do our utmost to help any Afghans who were hurt, and at many times we exceeded the wounded's own comrades in our urgency, something which was not lost on our Afghan partners.

## **Reflection**

This incident helped me figure out how I would personally define my relationship with my counterparts. I came to think of myself as a legal advocate arguing for my Afghan counterparts within the U.S. system. I argued for the requests and always sought their benefit while making clear that I wouldn't lie for them. I knew my chain of command and our larger strategy and was able to trust that a fair call would be made if one of my requests for assistance was denied.

Specifically defining my relationship and responsibilities left me with practical advantages that I wouldn't have otherwise had. First, it focused my efforts and let me make decisions faster. Second, I could always go to my counterparts and say with honesty that I'd done everything I could to help them. My counterparts felt this honesty and desire to help them day to day, and it made them more willing to

listen and offer their own opinions candidly. Third, I did not get overly upset and burned out when they lied or tried to game our medical evacuation (MEDEVAC) or air support systems. Clients try to game the courts. I just had to show them how bad this would be for them in the long run.

### **Third Experience: It's All Political**

*Often organizational relationships can be misleading and must be clarified. The actual interrelationships among and within organizations seldom follow a line-and-block diagram. Instead, they are heavily influenced by circumstances, personalities, perceptions, and resources. — FM 3-07.1, Security Force Assistance*

Joint coordination centers were a consistent challenge for Grey 1 and its fellow SFAATs. Dubbed operational coordination centers (OCCs), they were divided into provincial (OCC-P) and district (OCC-D) levels. The intent of these centers was to encourage mutual cooperation and information sharing between widely dispersed Afghan units from different branches of the ANSF. These centers were set up much like a command post with communication systems, maps, and representatives from each service which operated within that coordination center's district or province. This cross-service coordination was absolutely necessary to conduct a successful counterinsurgency, but personal and organizational politics severely hindered the performance of the OCCs.

My first exposure to these challenges occurred in May as the fighting season increased in intensity. The local OCC-D experienced a great deal of difficulty in providing coordination between the Afghan National Army (ANA) kandak and an ABP unit located in the same district. Ideally, they would report to their ABP radio operators in the OCC-D. Because both the ABP and the ANA worked side-by-side in the OCC-D, the ABP radio operator could then directly coordinate with the ANA to receive assistance. In practice, this did not happen. There were two notable, systemic causes of failure that stemmed from politics.

First, the success of these centers was highly dependent on the individual commanders of the units involved. These commanders were often reluctant to make specific and firm agreements on who was responsible for what duties. Many times, it was a matter of power sharing and prestige. In our case, the ANA had the greater prestige and resources and so were reluctant to give any control of their assets over to the ABP. The ABP, meanwhile, could be overly resentful of their smaller status and would quickly give up on attempting coordination. The OCCs' lack of any command authority furthered the inter-service conflict as it encouraged individual commanders already incentivized to seek personal gain to use the OCC-D as another avenue to gain power.

Rivalry between commanders was furthered by the regional emphasis on family and tribe first and by the many divisions in national politics and ideology. Afghan military leaders and their subordinates often considered it natural to use their positions to place their related family and tribe in an advantageous position. Further, Afghanistan's military leadership is intimately connected to its political and ideological groups, unlike the U.S. or many European armies where there is at least an ideal of apolitical armed services.

This could be workable except for the extreme diversity of possible interests that commanders can represent or have grudges against. As of February 2014, there were 48 registered political parties. Even grouped together, they represent over eight distinct political actors, and individual commanders often work to further their own group's agendas.<sup>4</sup> Taken together, these additional loyalties and feuds made cooperation between commanders and the services they led extremely difficult. In the case of this OCC-D, the ABP commander was a former expatriate with extensive Russian training and education. His ideas of an ideal Afghan military were relatively western, progressive, and idealistic. This could make it difficult for him to connect with the more traditional ANA commander who represented a small but significant group of individuals who had been employed by the pre-Taliban central government.

The second issue of politics at the OCC-D came from within our own ranks. Specifically, Grey 1 and the SFAAT assigned to the ANA suffered a period of chilled relations right at the time when the OCC-D was a focus. The reason for this was an issue familiar to many advisors in past conflicts: both teams and their supporting units viewed the performance of Afghan units as reflections of the partnered SFAAT's performance. As previously mentioned, both the ABP and the ANA hindered one another at various times. As both SFAATs became frustrated with "their Afghans" lack of progress, it became tempting to blame other advising teams. Cross-coordination in discovering a solution to the OCC-D was slowed until individual outreaches eventually healed the rift.

My second exposure to the difficulties of such politics came near the end of our deployment, in September. I had moved to a new SFAAT dedicated to advising an OCC-P whose main focus was on getting the Afghans to successfully coordinate with helicopters without U.S. assistance. However, progress was extremely slow.

To begin, the commander of OCC-P and his staff were unwilling to put forth the necessary effort that was required to coordinate air-ground operations. This came about partly because the different services treated the OCC-P as unimportant compared to working in the regular kandaks. As a result, the officers at the OCC-P felt disenfranchised. The commander wandered around in his civilian clothes and casually talked with radio operators or advisors as they tried to deal with reports of enemy attacks. There were several instances when improvised explosive devices (IEDs) had detonated and Afghan officers were more interested in discussing home life than trying to figure out what happened. Eventually, I learned that several of these officers had once been enthusiastic in their duties. However, they were passed over in promotions, which was a frequent occurrence for those serving in the OCC-P.

Next, coordination between the Afghans and the advisors became temporarily disrupted as a new unit from the U.S. came in to replace us. Unlike our original team, which was very focused on advising, the new team was particularly uninterested in the OCC-P and more focused on security operations. This was partly a manning issue. Because of the draw down, the team was smaller. However, it was also because they had no high-ranking advisors. Their commander's primary responsibility was as a combat officer. His performance evaluations and objectives were, thus, much less tied to how the Afghans performed. In contrast, our commander was himself an advisor. Even with Grey 1 in Orgun-E, there were high-ranking members in TF 2-14's command that had been advisors at one point and could act as advocates for advisors. This lack of command interest trickled down to the lower levels as some individuals from the new team showed no interest in collecting the many lessons learned before the switch was completed.

## **Reflection**

Military operations never occur in a vacuum. Because they are so grounded in relationships, advising operations are particularly subject to political pressures created by organizational issues, personality conflicts, or national decisions.

Advisors must always consider the positions from which their counterparts operate. For example, I initially held a very unfavorable opinion of the OCC-P's commander, and I avoided interaction with him as much as could be considered polite so that I could focus on those I perceived as accomplishing something — the radio operators. My incorrect view of the OCC-P commander was because I did not understand how many incentives the commander had not to put forth effort. Once I recognized his personal grievances (missing promotions, feeling powerless), I was able to modify my approach with him. I gave special attention towards affirming his experience and capability and was rewarded by the enthusiasm he later showed in personally supervising the helicopter operations we were so keen on them learning.

I also learned valuable lessons in how quickly internal conflicts within or between U.S. teams can affect the treatment the advised forces receive. Operations in Grey 1 suffered because of our conflict with another SFAAT. Neither team benefited from opposing the other, but it happened anyway because we each had an emotional stake in the performance of our individual Afghan counterparts, and we each perceived that our own Afghans were suffering from the negligence of those on the other team. This conflict was resolved, but for a time information sharing and coordination was severely hampered. When a team is deployed for nine to 15 months, it is very important to maintain that relationship. After all, how could we have expected the Afghans we advised to work together when we could not even work together ourselves?

Finally, I learned that many political conflicts are driven by organizational design and culture decisions. The OCCs lacked any officer with command authority and so were reduced to suggesting courses of action to the units they coordinated with. This led to feelings of helplessness and disenfranchisement among their personnel and later to problems in advising them.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> MG John H. Cushman, Debriefing Report, RCS CSFOR-74. Exit Tour Debrief, San Francisco: Delta Regional Assistance Command Headquarters, 1972.

<sup>2</sup> Robert D. Ramsay III, "Advice for Advisors: Suggestions and Observations from Lawrence to the Present," Global War on Terrorism Occasional Paper, 26 February 2006.

<sup>3</sup> "Afghan National Security Forces: Actions Needed to Improve Plans for Sustaining Capability Assessment Efforts," Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction (SIGAR) 14-33 Audit Report, February 2014.

<sup>4</sup> Malaiz Daud, "The Political Landscape of Afghanistan and the Presidential Election of 2014," A CIDOB Policy Research Project, Barcelona Centre for International Affairs, February 2014.

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