

Unity of Command through Unity of Effort



by CPT Jacob S. Conkright

A war in Afghanistan had never crossed the minds of leaders within our armed forces. However, after the attacks of Sept. 11, 2001 (9/11), the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), U.S. Central Command (CENTCOM) and U.S. Army Special Operations Command (USASOC) started devising a plan to retaliate against the al-Qaeda terrorist network and the Taliban who controlled Afghanistan.

Al-Qaeda knocked down the twin towers of the World Trade Center in New York, crashed an airliner into the Pentagon and crashed yet another plane into a field near Shanksville, PA, when the passengers intervened to prevent al-Qaeda's use of United Airlines Flight 93 as a weapon to attack another U.S. target. After-action speculation was that the four terrorists who hijacked Flight 93 had intended to attack one of several possible targets in the area that included the White House, the U.S. Capitol, the Camp David presidential retreat in Maryland or one of several nuclear power plants along the U.S. eastern seaboard.

During the first days of the war in Afghanistan in October 2001, Combined Joint Special Operations Task Force (CJSOTF) and CENTCOM faced a difficult and complex mission set. Afghanistan is a rugged, landlocked country surrounded by countries who were unwilling to support U.S. combat operations in and around their territory. Afghanistan is also fractured internally by warring ethnic tribes. Furthermore, because there was not yet a finalized war plan for Afghanistan, U.S. representatives had to hastily conduct diplomatic work in neighboring countries to develop launch and staging capabilities and to create a logistics chain to support forces in theater.

USASOC quickly developed a plan to place Joint Special Operations Command (JSOC), Special Forces Group (SFG) and sea, air and land (SEAL) teams within the theater to work with local warlords and create the Northern Alliance. CENTCOM and the CIA believed three warlords – Abdul Rashid Dostum, Ustad Atta Mohammed and Haji Mohammad Mohaqiq – were the key to fighting the Taliban due to their

major influence in the area. The United States would use this to its advantage by bringing the three warlords together to fight for a common purpose. This was the strategic aim of the mission.

The president designated CENTCOM commander GEN Tommy R. Franks as the officer responsible for the planning and execution of a joint invasion of Afghanistan. In preparation for the invasion, GEN Franks decided to create an *ad hoc* command-and-control (C2) structure where he would retain headquarters in Tampa, FL, due to the time it would take to establish a necessary joint-operations center (JOC) in-country (soon to be Qatar). Doing this was a substantial risk because the C2 node would be located nearly 8,000 miles away from the battlefield.

Managing risk

GEN Franks mitigated this risk by sending SOF into Afghanistan to develop the situation. There was pressure on CENTCOM to retaliate quickly against the Taliban, but deploying conventional forces into theater was not a

feasible option because it takes about six months to effectively deploy a conventional force overseas. Therefore special-operations forces (SOF) were the obvious pick to deploy ahead of a major conventional force because SOF's primary training revolved around unconventional warfare.^{1,2}

GEN Franks' decision to decentralize his command and empower subordinate leaders during a time of great political pressure toward centralization proved critical to the mission success of SOF in Afghanistan, and it was a demonstration of the value of unity of command through unity of effort.

The C2 structure had many pitfalls since Tampa was the main hub of information. Failures to determine who reported to whom, to manage the complications of operating in different time zones and to designate approving authority for potential targets all contributed to frustrate SOF mission success in theater from October-December 2001. These problems endangered the chances of SOF success and demanded immediate solutions. In response, CENTCOM created CJSOTF, Combined Joint Task Force (CJTF) Mountain, Joint Interagency Task Force Counterterrorism and Coalition Joint Civil Military Operations Task Force.

Under CJSOTF, there were three joint special-operations task forces (JSOTF) embedded in different warlords' armies, all with a common purpose of fighting the Taliban by conducting clandestine and unconventional warfare operations.³

There were four noteworthy subordinate commands stood up under GEN Franks' orders. The commands were to eliminate sanctuary to al-Qaeda in southern Afghanistan by putting pressure on them in their own backyard. The intent was to change the environment of Afghanistan to allow time and space for conventional forces capable of withstanding a campaign to be inserted.⁴

- **JSOTF North, also known as JSOTF Dagger**, assigned to northern Afghanistan, was composed of Operational Detachment Alpha (ODA) teams from 5th SFG, Air Force Special Operations Command and

160th Special Operations Aviation Regiment. TF Dagger's mission was to work with Northern Alliance commanders and enable their seizure of Taliban-controlled cities.⁵

- **JSOTF South, also known as JSOTF K-Bar**, assigned to southern Afghanistan, was composed of SEAL Teams 2, 3 and 8 and ODAs from 3rd SFG. TF K-Bar's mission revolved around foreign internal defense, unconventional warfare, special reconnaissance and site exploitation.⁶
- **JSOTF Sword** was composed of Delta Force, Naval Special Warfare Development Group, Ranger Regiment, Intelligence Support Activity and SOAR. Their missions revolved around capturing or killing al-Qaeda and Taliban high-ranking officials.⁷

- **CJTF Mountain** was a conventional Army unit composed of Soldiers from 10th Mountain Infantry Division. TF Mountain's mission revolved around security and support operations and provision of a quick-reaction force for ODAs in contact. In March 2002, LTG Franklin Hagenbeck, commander of TF Mountain, would command the CJSOTF conducting Operation Anaconda.⁸

Continuity of leadership

Joint Publication (JP) 3-0, *Joint Operations*, states the principles and doctrine for conducting joint operations, defining C2 as "the exercise of authority and direction by a properly designated commander over assigned and attached forces in the accomplishment of a mission. Command, in particular,



Figure 1. 10th Mountain Division Soldiers deploy for Operation Anaconda. (U.S. Army photo)

includes both the authority and responsibility for effectively using available resources to accomplish assigned missions.”⁹

Continuity of leadership allows units to conduct constant operations without being hindered by an individual's lack of knowledge of the common operating picture. Command passed through the hands of three individuals from October 2001 to March 2002 with minimal impact to the mission. GEN Franks established task forces Dagger, Sword and K-Bar as a CJSOTF at Karshi Khanabad (K2) Air Base, Uzbekistan, in early October 2001. From a documentation and orders perspective, CJSOTF was under the operational control (OPCON) of U.S. Special Operations Component Central and therefore OPCON to CENTCOM.

The 16th Special Operations Wing (SOW) commander, COL Frank J. Kisner, was the initial commander of the JSOTF at K2. This was due to the air campaign being the first phase of the war. Also, the combat-search-and-rescue unit that Kisner commanded provided a contingency response force if a downed-pilot situation happened. Since 16th SOW was initially the only operational unit on K2, the obvious decision for CENTCOM was to have Kisner command assets co-located with 16th SOW. It was not until 5th SFG deployed as part of TF Dagger that COL John Mullholland assumed command of CJSOTF due to having the greater part of assets within K2.¹⁰

Communication challenges

As the air campaign came to a close and preparation for Operation Anaconda began to take place, CENTCOM realized there must be a division headquarters JOC on the ground that was capable of C2 of the wide spectrum of assets involved in the operation. In 2001, SFGs did not possess any significant ability to expand C2 beyond the simple radios they were given, relying mainly on satellite communication. A division headquarters gave 5th SFG a lead element and lead integrator with a function of systems to provide unity of effort, interoperability, centralized planning and decentralized execution. CJTF Mountain was the only

division-level asset in theater capable of fulfilling this position, which put LTG Hagenbeck in command of CJ-SOTF.¹¹

CENTCOM's C2 had ambiguous lines of communication, which led to unclear operations in the Afghanistan theater from the beginning. CENTCOM established the organization structure of C2, which lasted for the beginning stages of fighting in Afghanistan. Author Denis Doty believes the crisis CENTCOM faced did not enable an adequate buildup of forces and forced an impromptu command relationship.¹²

A joint task force (JTF) JOC allows forces to run operations 24/7 while providing information requirements both vertically and horizontally for strategic, operational and tactical planning. Unfortunately, with more than 8,000 miles between Tampa and K2, time zones caused complications to arise without a JTF JOC. The TFs were conducting operations while leaders at CENTCOM were sleeping, and by the time they woke up, the war had changed. CJSOTF was also affected by waking up daily to new guidance from CENTCOM.

Since no JTF JOC was established, the Joint Staff was not getting the information it needed to brief the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff. This caused the TF J-3s to provide daily updates directly to the Joint Staff on mission and after-action briefs. The TF J-3s had two windows of opportunity a day for these video teleconferences (VTCs) with the White House Situation Room and adjacent units in theater. This affected leaders being able to change operations since TFs are not manned to maintain a 24/7 JOC.^{13, 14}

CENTCOM's not establishing a JTF JOC in theater was a major failure in C2 for forces on the ground and back home. Establishing a JTF JOC at least at division level helps alleviate this issue by providing the information that higher headquarters needs while simultaneously running operations in theater. An operation of this magnitude needs a staff that can support it, and this was not the case during the initial stages of Afghanistan.

Doty discussed how doctrine states that any SOF operating in the same

theater will fall under the same canopy of one joint-force Special Operations component commander (JF-SOCC) but does not reference anything with two separate entities within the SOF community. The operations order published at the beginning of the operation clearly delineated that the JF-SOCC reported to CENTCOM, and TF Dagger and other SOFs were subordinate special-operations components. This C2 was understood within the SOF community, but according to Doty, it did not make its way to forces operating outside of the community.¹⁵

The 10th Mountain Infantry Division was the only conventional Army forces operating in theater from October to December 2001. While 10th Mountain worked alongside SOF, its role in security and support did not seem to be impacted by the C2 that SOF was abiding by. However, the C2 structure seemed to have more of an impact at the planning level and during asset allocation when preparing for Operation Anaconda.

The ideal solution would have been to establish a SOF headquarters in theater that controls operations and communication among the different TFs, the combined-air-operations center (CAOC) and CENTCOM to allow more effective cross-coordination. However this was not a feasible option due to time constraints involved with establishing a headquarters in theater, leading CJSOTF to a decentralized execution.

Unfortunately, the required relationships needed to fully support combat operations in theater were not established since there was no timed-phased force deployment data (TPFDD) in place. No TPFDD meant no advance-force staging base using U.S. Navy carriers from which to launch. This required CENTCOM to work the diplomatic piece simultaneous to the operations piece to deploy combat forces. This forced CENTCOM to develop ways for conventional forces to get to Afghanistan.

The preferred way would have been through Pakistan, but at that time there was a long period where Pakistan was providing support to the Taliban and al-Qaeda. Therefore Pakistan

would not allow the United States to launch attacks from it on the organizations it was supporting. This forced CENTCOM to attack from the north, which had many problem sets of its own. CENTCOM negotiated a deal with Uzbekistan to allow SOF to operate out of K2. The K2 basing rights show an instance where CENTCOM was able to work a diplomatic deal to enable U.S. forces on the ground to ensure mission success while also maintaining control in Tampa.¹⁶

Author Walter Perry discusses the basing constraints and the effects it had on both air and ground operations. He explained that CENTCOM had negotiated the basing rights, but operations were still limited. Airfields were often in poor condition and lacked the services needed to launch certain types of aircraft that could be employed if the situation was favorable. Many of the bases required long-distance flights with multiple air-to-air refueling points due to the distance from the area where SOF was operating.

Also, there were nations that allowed U.S. forces to occupy their territory but did not give launching authority in support of combat operations. All in all, this delayed the Air Force's ability to operate near Central Asia due to launch permissions needed from neighboring nations. The U.S. Navy and CENTCOM countered this constraint by staging an aircraft carrier in the Indian Ocean. Due to the distance, carrier pilots flew four- to six-hour operations, requiring refueling the aircraft to refuel three to four times, along with restricting flight time-on-target to one hour.¹⁷ CENTCOM's ability to develop a plan to stage the aircraft carrier in support of a landlocked country led to a successful air campaign for the Northern Alliance.

Controlling air assets

Controlling air-asset allocation among different forces operating in the same theater can be a fickle thing. Leaders had to look at whose mission sat higher in priority and attempt to divide assets equally. The chain of approval developed by CENTCOM had any information collected on targets in Afghanistan sent to both the CAOC in Saudi Arabia and CENTCOM in Tampa. The

CAOC would then send potential targets to CENTCOM for review. CENTCOM would review targets to ensure they were within the rules of engagement and work both vertically and horizontally with external agencies to ensure there would not be a diplomatic incident as a result of hitting the target. From Tampa, the approved targets would be sent to the CAOC, which then tasked both Air Force and Navy units with the approved targets from CENTCOM.

The Supreme Allied Commander-Europe (SACEUR) in Stuttgart, Germany, provided a colonel to serve as the TF commander to control air-asset allocation. The TF later became TF Dagger-West/SACEUR Forward. This established a direct link for air between the CAOC in Saudi Arabia and the TFs on the ground to ensure air assets were distributed across the theater to simultaneously support the TFs.¹⁸ The TFs' front line spread out across the theater created little need to deconflict air space, further reinforcing the support provided for air-asset distribution.

TF Sword, a national asset, handled missions involving the capture or kill of high-ranking leadership within the Taliban and al-Qaeda. The niche mission set of TF Sword caused it to only be on the ground for very narrow windows a handful of times. This allowed JSOC capabilities and AC-130s to directly support TF Dagger.

While in theater, TF Sword reported directly to JSOC, with the exception of informing CENTCOM about missions it conducted and providing after-action reports. During the initial push in Afghanistan, TF Sword's focus was al-Qaeda, while TFs Dagger and K-Bar focused on the Taliban. Al-Qaeda targets were higher priority, causing assets to be divided in favor of TF Sword for the handful of times it was on the ground in contact.¹⁹ From October 2001-March 2002, there were minimal issues with asset allocation among the TFs.

While TF K-Bar ran into the issue of not being allocated enough air assets, it was able to compensate with Marine Corps air. The only external tasking to the CAOC was the Marines' air assets since they were part of the Marine Air-Ground Task Force, and they usually

only had to support the ground guy, whether it was over the shore or in Afghanistan. However, TF K-Bar and the CAOC were able to work around this by placing Marine air in the classified annex of the air-tasking order.²⁰

While it would seem that the ambiguous lines of communication would cause delayed approval of air assets, this was not the case. Since U.S. Air Force AC-130s were prioritized to TF Dagger and U.S. Marine Corps air to TF K-Bar, there was little need to deconflict air space among operational units. Also, it was not until March 2002, when conventional forces operated parallel to SOF, that forces needed to follow targeting doctrine and liaison handbooks to submit air-tasking orders within 24 to 96 hours of targeting, intelligence collection, air-support requests and airlift-support planning.²¹ The ability to have air assets on station at a moment's notice enabled decentralized execution for TF commanders.²²

CENTCOM's Combat-Arms Assessment Team's initial-impressions report states "the use of [SOF] in concert with conventional forces was difficult due to the poorly defined command relationships and SOF's predisposition to avoid sharing information or conduct parallel planning with conventional forces. SOF elements' unwillingness to vertically share information with the Coalition Forces Land Component Command staff and horizontally with other conventional forces hindered operational and tactical planning and execution."²³

Centralized execution

The preferred method of control in an operation of this magnitude is decentralized execution. However, CENTCOM's staff location in Tampa resulted in centralized execution of target processing.

The relationship that ground forces had with CENTCOM and CAOC for target processing shows CENTCOM's need for information to work the diplomatic pieces of the puzzle. Authors Walter L. Perry and David Kassing discussed how the desire was for operators to have latitude when executing an operation, but the rushed retaliation against the Taliban caused

CENTCOM to simultaneously work the diplomatic arena.²⁴

While Perry and Kassing are correct in reference to Operation Anaconda, they lack information about target processing in Afghanistan from October-December 2001. Commanders were given their mission and intent, and then they had the leeway to process their targets internally.

TFs Dagger and K-Bar were allocated resources necessary to execute operations within mission parameters. Target information was reported to the Joint Staff and White House Situation Room daily to paint the picture for leaders who were not on the ground. There were also daily VTCs where the different TFs would coordinate to ensure mission success. TF Dagger's main objective was to push the Taliban out, while the mission of TFs K-Bar and Sword was to be a strike team. This unity of effort required cross-coordination to ensure mission success for the entire CJSOTF.

CJTF Mountain also took part in these daily VTCs to share information and conduct parallel planning with the other TFs. One major contributing factor was that the conventional forces' mission did not align with SOFs. Therefore there wasn't the need for SOF to share the same amount of information with conventional forces as compared to the other SOF task forces during

October-December 2001. It was not until Operation Anaconda, when LTG Hagenbeck took command and tactical control, that all assets came to bear. This required parallel planning between conventional forces and SOF.

Takeaways

GEN Franks' decision to decentralize his command and empower subordinate leaders during a time of great political pressure toward centralization proved critical to SOF mission success in Afghanistan. It was a demonstration of the value of unity of command through unity of effort.

CENTCOM's hunger for information of activities in theater was mainly due to there being no TPFDD for the region. That being the case, CENTCOM had to undertake diplomatic relations in neighboring countries to develop launch and staging capabilities and to create a logistics chain capable of supporting the long-term campaign that would follow. Unfortunately, CENTCOM failed to create a centralized command in theater by not establishing a division-level JTF JOC capable of conducting centralized planning. While this would seem a major issue, GEN Franks chose forces capable of operating with minimal guidance, intending for them to develop the theater.

Unity of effort is the state of

harmonizing efforts among multiple organizations toward a similar objective.²⁵ The CJSOTF's capability and capacity to enable one another toward mission success further supports the belief of unity of command through unity of effort.

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Notes

¹ Author's interview with U.S. Navy retired Rear Adm. Kerry Metz, 2021.

² Author's interview with U.S. Army retired GEN David D. McKiernan, 2021.

³ Metz.

⁴ Author's interview with COL Mark Rosengard, U.S. Special Forces, 2021.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Metz.

⁷ Leigh Neville, *Special Forces in the War on Terror (General Military)*, Oxford, England: Osprey Publishing, 2015.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ JP 3-0, *Joint Operations*, Washington, DC, Sept. 10, 2001.

¹⁰ U.S. Air Force MAJ Denis P. Doty, "Command and Control of Special Operations Forces for the 21st Century Contingency Operations," Naval War College paper, Feb. 3, 2003.

¹¹ Rosengard.

¹² Doty.

¹³ Metz.

¹⁴ Rosengard.

¹⁵ Doty.

¹⁶ McKiernan.

¹⁷ Walter Perry and David Kassing, *Toppling the Taliban*, Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2015.

¹⁸ Author's interview with U.S. Air Force COL Cory Peterson, 2021.

¹⁹ Metz.

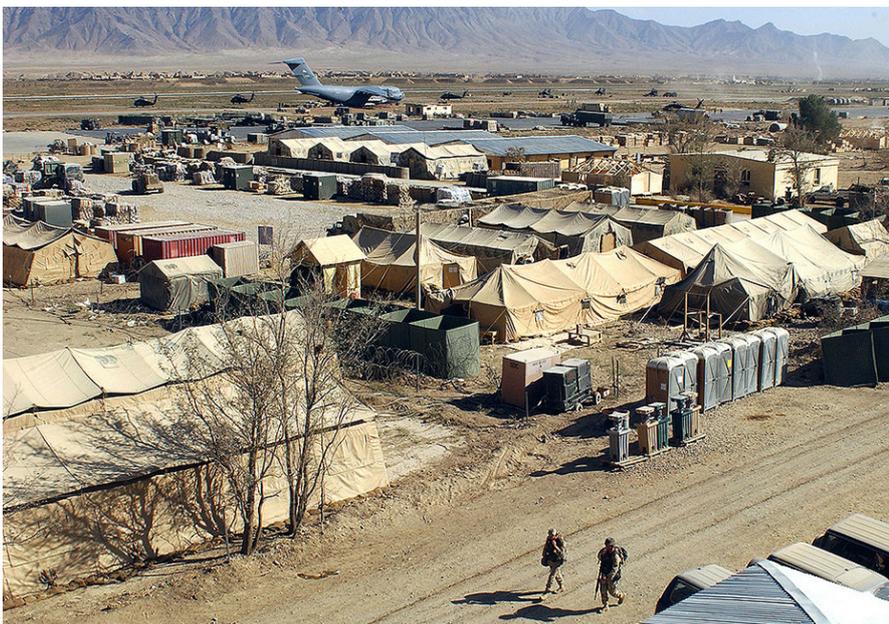


Figure 2. The temporary military base at Bagram, Afghanistan. (U.S. Army photo)

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ U.S. Air Force MAJ David J. Lyle, "Operation Anaconda: Lessons Learned, or Lessons Observed?", U.S. Army Command and General Staff College, June 12, 2009, <https://apps.dtic.mil/dtic/tr/fulltext/u2/a502029.pdf>.

²² Rosengard.

²³ Cited in Doty.

²⁴ Perry and Kassing.

²⁵ Scott Lawrence, "Joint C2 through Unity of Command," *Joint Forces Quarterly*, Autumn/Winter 1994-95.

ACRONYM QUICK-SCAN

C2 – command and control

CAOC – combined-air-operations center

CENTCOM – U.S. Central Command

CIA – Central Intelligence Agency

CJTF – combined joint task force

CJSOTF – Combined Joint Special Operations Task Force

JFSOCC – joint-force Special Operations component commander

JOC – joint-operations center

JP – joint publication

JSOC – Joint Special Operations Command

JTF – joint task force

JSOTF – joint special-operations task force

K2 – Karshi Khanabad Air Base

ODA – Operational Detachment Alpha (12-person startup team of Special Forces)

OPCON – operational control

SACEUR – Supreme Allied Commander-Europe

SEAL – sea, air and land

SFG – Special Forces Group

SOAR – Special Operations Aviation Regiment

SOF – special-operations forces

SOW – special-operations wing

TF – task force

TPFDD – timed-phased force deployment data

USASOC – U.S. Army Special Operations Command

VTC – videoteleconference

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