
INSIDER ATTACKS:

REPAIRING A DAMAGED PARTNERSHIP

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Emerging tactics used by an adaptive and creative enemy have forced our Soldiers to be in a state of high alert 24 hours a day.

In February 2012, an enemy combatant wearing an Afghan National Army (ANA) uniform shot and killed two U.S. Soldiers inside a joint forward operating base (FOB). This single act of violence nearly destroyed a partnership that had been built with blood, sweat, and tears over a period of 10 months.

With the Army's continued focus in Afghanistan on partnership and advising the Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF), leaders must understand how to prevent insider threats and not let them destroy the fabric of relationships built between U.S. and Afghan forces. The article will discuss why insider threats and attacks are so devastating, what leaders and Soldiers can do to prevent them, what steps can be taken to repair a damaged partnership after an insider attack, and how we can better prepare for a mission solely based on partnership.

Protests

By February 2012, Comanche Troop, 3rd Squadron, 4th Cavalry Regiment, had been deployed in Afghanistan's Nangarhar Province for 10 months. I had served the majority of the deployment as the troop executive officer (XO). Comanche Troop spent the first six months of the deployment in eastern Nangarhar at FOB Shinwar and the remainder of the deployment at FOB Connolly in western Nangarhar. In both locations, the troop's primary focus was developing an active partnership with the ANSF.

Toward the end of February, tensions were running high throughout Regional Command (RC)-East as word spread that Qurans were being burned at Bagram Airfield. Regardless of the truth or validity to the story, an aggressive anti-coalition force campaign by the Taliban sent many locals into a rage, sparking protests and violence within days. On 22 February, large gatherings outside FOB Connolly's front gates turned into small riots. Angry protesters set fires to abandoned structures just outside of the FOB, destroyed cars belonging to local nationals working on the base, and randomly fired weapons to elicit a coalition response.

The 3rd ANA Kandak (battalion) immediately responded to the protests by attempting to disperse the crowd. Simultaneously, Comanche Troop increased security inside the base and kept its defensive posture elevated until late that evening when the crowd was fully dispersed.

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Early in the afternoon of 23 February, the second day of protests, I heard more shots fired. Previously, the gunfire had sounded distant, coming from outside the FOB. These shots, however, sounded different and much closer. I ran toward where I thought the sounds were coming from only to see mass confusion at the quick reaction force (QRF) staging area. Over the troop radio, I heard even more confusion but was able to gather that there were, in fact, shots fired near the QRF staging area and that two U.S.

Soldiers had been injured.

After seeing that the first sergeant was en route to the staging area, I took up position with our snipers in a tower overlooking the FOB. It was there that the transmissions on the radio became clear as I could see some of the aftermath. The shots had come from the ANA platoon at the staging area. It appeared that an ANA soldier had fired at Comanche Troop's 4th Platoon, which was part of the joint QRF. From the tower, I observed a crowd to the south of the FOB along the outer perimeter. The gunman must have coordinated this gathering and used it as part of his escape route. I watched as U.S. forces and contracted security personnel fired at the man, posing in an ANA uniform, wounding him as he made it over the gates before dissolving into the large body of protesters.

The two Soldiers were transported to the FOB aid station, but shortly after we learned that both had died. This was Comanche Troop's second "green-on-blue" incident of the deployment. The first resulted in nothing more than a scare, but this time a man in an ANA uniform had shot and killed two U.S. Soldiers on the very FOB he shared with them. Initially, it was unclear if the gunman had acted alone. It was also unclear if this was a result of the Quran burnings or an act planned well in advance just waiting for an opportune time.

Developing Partnership

When Comanche Troop, 3-4 CAV deployed to Afghanistan in April 2011, the focus for all ground forces was to build successful partnerships with the ANSF. This period marked the initial phases of the ANSF taking a more active role in the security within their own environment and coalition forces conducting all operations as joint missions. Battalion and company-level command teams partnered with Afghan leadership within the ANA, Afghan Uniformed Police (AUP), Afghan Border Patrol, and governmental leadership at the district and provincial levels. Security Force Assistance Teams



Photos by SGT Trey Harvey

At left, an Afghan National Army officer takes notes during a combined arms rehearsal at Forward Operating Base Connolly in Afghanistan on 2 January 2012. Above, U.S. Soldiers from the 3rd Squadron, 4th Cavalry, 3rd Brigade Combat Team, 25th Infantry Division, gather around a terrain model during the rehearsal.

(SFATs) were becoming the norm throughout RC-East as the demand for advise and assist roles grew.

Although there was direct emphasis being placed on partnership during this time, the reality was that we still didn't quite understand the best ways to develop those relationships. Many of our Soldiers in 3-4 CAV had previous deployments to Iraq and, right or wrong, carried with them some level of disdain for working with a host national security force. We followed the guidance to place Afghans in the lead by creating the illusion that all patrols and missions were joint and evenly partnered. In reality, U.S. forces controlled every patrol. Because we had not developed any sort of relationship, least of all trust, and because we believed in our own tactical superiority, we decided on everything from mission planning to execution.

The difficulties with the partnership were often a matter of misunderstandings between coalition forces and the ANSF primarily because of our preconceived notions of how they should operate. A lack in understanding the different roles and responsibilities of the different entities that made up the ANSF, coupled with initial expectations of the ANSF operating at our level, created an early struggle for a successful partnership.

Although it was clear that each entity of the ANSF was independent of one another, oftentimes at the Soldier level, opinions of our partners were consolidated, regardless of their different skill set, organizational structure, funding, equipment, or levels of perceived laziness and corruption. Comanche Soldiers initially saw undisciplined security forces that couldn't adhere to timelines, proper uniform, or the ability to conduct patrols without U.S. fuel. These compounding problems caused our Soldiers to not fully trust our partners. Additionally, it was obvious to them that there was a severe lack of trust

between the different entities of the ANSF. Information was rarely shared between two organizations, and AUP or ANA leaders would often not speak openly in front of one another. Early on, this distrust resulted in an unwillingness to work together and made it difficult for Comanche Troop, leaders and Soldiers alike, to understand ANSF as a whole.

Midway through the troop's deployment, positive changes took place between the relationships of U.S. forces and the ANSF. Our Soldiers witnessed as Afghan forces fell victim to the same improvised explosive devices (IEDs) that cause significant damage to our own forces. Our company commander and first sergeant stressed the importance of active partnership, and junior leaders within the formation were teaching their Soldiers to understand that cultural differences didn't make us, as Americans, any better — but simply different. The realization that the ANSF were a valuable asset to have in understanding the operational environment as a whole was beginning to set in, and within a short time, the average Soldier's individual mindset started to shift.

In addition to the opinion shift and efforts to understand a foreign culture's differences, Comanche Troop leaders set the example in partnering at the command and staff levels. The company commander worked daily with the ANA kandak commander and executive officer (XO) while the first sergeant developed strong relationships with the S3, command sergeant major, and operations sergeant major. As the XO, I worked closely with the SFAT at FOB Connolly, which gave me the opportunity to see the inner workings of the kandak's staff sections. We exercised the ANA's logistical supply system and assisted with developing maintenance lessons and schedules for all equipment. Additionally, we formed a joint tactical operations center (TOC) where together ANA

soldiers and Comanche Troop's battle captain were able to track force movement and coordinate mission support.

Comanche's commander continued the success of an active ANA partnership by extending our efforts to the AUP and ABP by holding weekly district security meetings with the local government and every faction of the ANSF. He also held multi-district meetings, bringing together multiple district governors and police chiefs in a forum that provided open dialogue and active partnerships with one another. Ultimately, it seemed that little could cause a divide in the progress we had made, and at the time of the attack, we were determined not to let it cause irreparable damage to our formation and relationships.

Rebuilding Trust

By late afternoon on the day of the attack, our troop commander, along with all troop leadership, had addressed Comanche Soldiers throughout the day, but there was a sense of disbelief among the majority of the Soldiers. After being so successful in developing an active partnership, the attack struck us harder than any IED or mortar attack did up to that point.

We then received word that two VIPs — U.S. Marine Corps GEN John R. Allen, commander of International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) – Afghanistan and United States Forces – Afghanistan, and General Sher Mohammad Karimi, ANA Chief of Staff — would be visiting the FOB to address the incident with our Soldiers and the ANA officers. That night, both leaders stressed the importance of not allowing a single

unfortunate event carried out by a lone gunman to set us back in the progress we had made. GEN Allen primarily focused his remarks to the ANA officers and praised them for their ability to take the lead in security operations and assured them the incident that took place was understood as an act of one, not the will of many. General Karimi then focused his comments toward Comanche troops. He was sympathetic and apologetic for the events that took place. He, too, stressed that was not how he or his formation felt about American Soldiers and was adamant that he would not tolerate anti-American thoughts and actions in his army.

Despite this, the legitimacy of the ANA became quickly unraveled in many of our Soldiers' eyes. This forced the command to put an immediate stop to thoughts and comments that would severely degrade the progress we had made with our partners over the past few months. Our company commander and first sergeant continued a very open partnership with the ANA battalion's leadership to show a united front by both formations. The ANA leadership engaged platoon leaders and platoon sergeants, expressing condolences in a way that was very visible to our Soldiers. Seeing the leaders stand together during a devastating period empowered our Soldiers to handle their emotions with a unique maturity. Although pain and anger remained, our Soldiers understood their duties and remained both mission and task oriented.

The command's initial focus was on the mental state and morale of the troop, specifically the platoon to which the two deceased Soldiers had belonged. The company commander's goal in this was to create a balance between

allowing the Soldiers an appropriate amount of down time to recover from their loss and sending them back into sector performing day-to-day operations. Having the platoon execute a normal patrol schedule after 48 hours prevented the Soldiers from sitting around the FOB, isolating themselves and dwelling on their loss. It was a mental challenge initially sending the platoon out into sector after such little time had passed to conduct joint patrols with those in the uniform that just attacked our own, but our Soldiers understood that if we weren't partnering then there was no purpose in us being there in the first place.

Immediately following the attack, we made every possible asset available to our Soldiers to help them move forward. Combat stress, mental health, and the brigade's chaplains all responded and maintained a steady presence at our FOB. Every Soldier in 4th Platoon was required to meet with one of the available assets to evaluate his current state. The squadron held a memorial at FOB Shinwar for our fallen brothers, giving the organization an opportunity to come together and pay respects for those we lost. We developed an extensively open and active dialogue which allowed our Soldiers to vent to one another, their leaders, and whoever else would listen in regard



Photo by SFC Mark Burrell

An all-wheeled vehicle mechanic assigned to Troop C, 3rd Squadron, 4th Cavalry Regiment, explains how to fix an Afghan Uniformed Police humvee at Forward Operating Base Shinwar in eastern Afghanistan's Nangarhar Province on 17 July 2011.

to the past events, and through this we were able to convey to our formation that this was the act of one, a single individual, and did not represent the ANA as a whole.

In addition to the intense focus we gave to our Soldiers following the attack, we also had to address our ANA counterparts. The Comanche commander initially spoke with all of the ANA leaders to gain an understanding of their current state and move toward closure. This also opened the doors for our leaders within the troop to have a formal dialogue with the ANA kandak's leaders, providing a format for both the ANA and U.S. Soldiers to speak to one another and help repair a bond

that was nearly shattered in a matter of minutes. It was obvious that the ANA soldiers were deeply affected by everything that happened and were utterly embarrassed by it.

In an effort to show their commitment to us as a partnered force, the ANA became obsessed with finding the gunman who was once in their formation. Records of past postings, family ties, and known associates were made available. Through their intelligence networks, the ANA kandak leadership and staff investigated possible locations for him in district. Two weeks later during a routine partnered operation, Soldiers found a cell phone on an insurgent combatant that had videos from the 23 February attack. The information from the ANA, along with the cell phone, was given to task force intelligence.

Through this, the caliber of our Soldiers was put to an extreme test, and the command was exceptionally proud



Photo by SFC Mark Burrell

An Infantry platoon leader assigned to Troop C, 3rd Squadron, 4th Cavalry Regiment, discusses strategy with Afghan Uniformed Police chief before assisting in a clearing operation on 19 July 2011.

of their composure, military bearing, and professionalism. Comanche Troop was able to continue a partnership with the ANSF during a very trying time. To say that there was a full sense of trust following the attack would be a lie, but to the credit of every Soldier there at FOB Connolly, we remained a mission-first organization.

When leadership is strong and united, it can set a tone that is easily followed despite whatever challenges are faced, both big and small. It was these leadership bonds built throughout the troop that allowed us to come together and move forward.

At the time this article was written, **CPT Seth Hildebrand** was attending the Maneuver Captains Career Course at Fort Benning, Ga. He served as executive officer of Troop C, 3rd Squadron, 4th Cavalry Regiment, 3rd Brigade Combat Team, 25th Infantry Division, during the unit's deployment to Afghanistan in 2011-2012.

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