PROFESSIONAL FORUM

Proper Reporting Procedures Important to Operational Success

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During combat operations in Afghanistan from 6 April to 20 May 2004, the 2nd Battalion, 75th Ranger Regiment, shaped the battlefield environment with reporting procedures that led to operational success and resulted in clear command and control even in the most austere environments. As the Alpha Company executive officer during this time, I witnessed firsthand the positive effects that proper reporting had on operational success.

Reporting and processing intelligence was one of the areas in which 2nd Ranger Battalion heavily focused its efforts during combat operations in Afghanistan. At every level of command, large amounts of manpower and resources were dedicated to the effort of gathering, processing, and acting on intelligence passed forward from the field. Every subordinate unit in the chain of command was expected to meet the information demands of its higher headquarters. To accomplish this, 2nd Battalion required its companies to submit accurate and detailed reports on a regular basis. To meet these demands, strict reporting procedures were instituted throughout the unit, and detailed intelligence products were to be forwarded on a daily basis. Without question, this aspect of combat operations extended the battlefield spectrum for fighting elements to levels not experienced before.

Due to operational requirements and the extended areas of operation in Afghanistan, significant distances separated Ranger rifle companies and rifle platoons. This created an atmosphere that put a premium on leader responsibility to submit timely and accurate reports. Two forms of reporting were used throughout the deployment to meet requirements: Radio (Satellite Communications or SATCOM) and HPW (portable computer). Both of these communication methods greatly facilitated the flow of information and allowed quality command and control in the most difficult environments. However, the need to stay constantly connected often required that the company commander and his command post or assistant command post stay stationary in order to continually pass guidance and process reports coming in from the platoons.

To ensure that information was being passed and collected, multiple methods of communication were implemented. First, the battalion staff published a daily fragmentary order (FRAGO) that was sent to company commanders via HPW. This FRAGO gave the commanders in the field clear guidance on what was occurring in the battalion as well as what was expected of each company during the next 24 hours. Second, daily conference calls occurred via SATCOM between the S2, S3, company commanders, and the battalion commander. During this conference call, each specific staff member/commander summarized significant events that had occurred over the last 24 hours and briefed actions that were to occur over the next 24-48 hours. These conference calls kept potentially confusing situations in synch because the staff and companies always knew what was occurring and how plans were being adjusted. Finally, companies in the field were required to submit daily operational and logistical summaries to the battalion headquarters that included specific information about the area of operation, the atmospherics within that area, and the personnel/logistical status of the company.

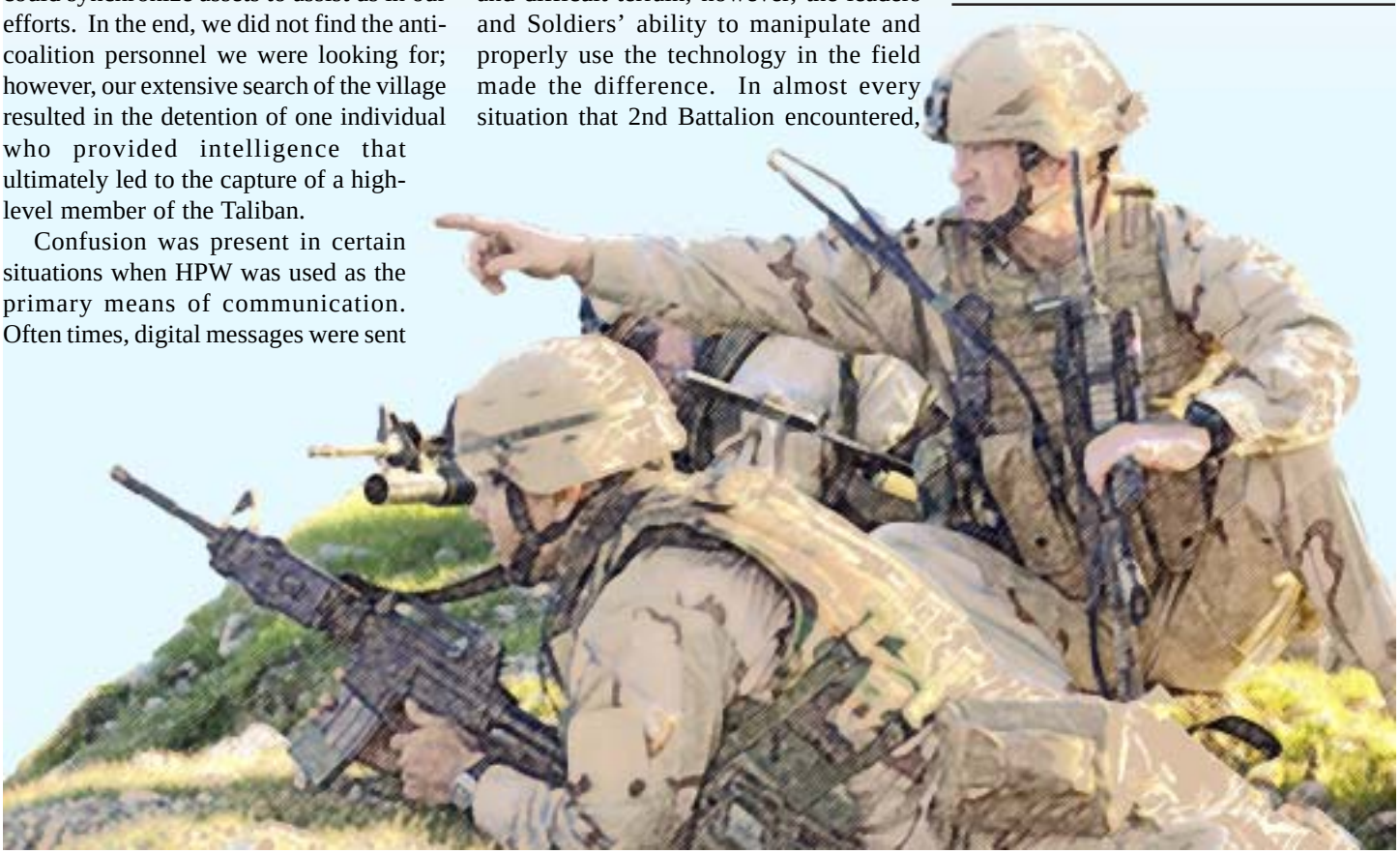
While the flow of information primarily came from companies to battalion and vice versa, these procedures required top notch platoon-level reporting since platoons were geographically separated from the company command post for the majority of combat operations. Therefore, in order for the company commander to build and submit accurate and timely reports, the platoon leaders had to be equally vigilant in their collection and processing of data from the field. These forms of reporting were vital to the success of the battalion in terms of synchronizing operations and assets across a large battlefield. Furthermore, these extensive reporting procedures allowed companies to adjust and execute operations on a moment's notice and act on real time intelligence.

In addition to sending reports, subordinate units were expected to be able to submit tactical plans from the field in the event that intelligence drove them to execute platoon and company missions on short notice. In one instance, a Ranger platoon was operating in an area approximately 50km away from the battalion headquarters and was faced with a situation that required clear and concise long-range communications. During the operation, Rangers from the platoon gathered intelligence that led us to a village that was believed to be the home of several potential anti-coalition personnel. As the executive officer and ground forces

commander at the time, the platoon leader and I processed the intelligence and reported back to the battalion. Because the intelligence appeared to be legitimate, I recommended that we move to the village to conduct a thorough search and interrogate the inhabitants.

For us to conduct a search of the village, I needed to submit a brief tactical plan via HPW to the battalion operations officer. Because actionable intelligence in Afghanistan is rare and often times fleeting, the platoon leader and I believed that we had limited time to act and that the situation demanded an urgency to move. Therefore, we quickly pulled Falconview imagery from our portable computer and added our maneuver graphics to the satellite imagery. Those graphics included the route that we would travel, the objective area broken into quadrants, and phase lines so that we could coordinate our movement with higher headquarters. Within a matter of minutes, I submitted the plan to the battalion headquarters, and the plan was approved. Our ability to do this proved to be important to mission success, as our higher headquarters was aware of our plan and could synchronize assets to assist us in our efforts. In the end, we did not find the anti-coalition personnel we were looking for; however, our extensive search of the village resulted in the detention of one individual who provided intelligence that ultimately led to the capture of a high-level member of the Taliban.

Confusion was present in certain situations when HPW was used as the primary means of communication. Often times, digital messages were sent as opposed to radio messages because elements did not want to tie up the radio net with long conversations. The fix to this was to send detailed orders and instructions over HPW. There were cases when orders to execute multiple operations, and the necessary guidance to execute those missions, was lost in the HPW traffic sent down to platoon leaders. During several missions, two to three platoons in the company were geographically separated from the company commander by significant distances. The net effect of this was that the company commander would have to pass guidance and issue orders over HPW. While the commander's guidance was understood and adhered to most of the time, instances occurred where instructions became confused simply because they were not explained as clearly as they would have been with the spoken word. This resulted in platoon leaders executing missions based on intuition and an understanding of the commander's intent.

On the ever-expanding battlefield of Afghanistan, proper reporting was an absolute necessity for the unit to be successful. Technology enhanced the unit's ability to communicate over long distances and difficult terrain; however, the leaders and Soldiers' ability to manipulate and properly use the technology in the field made the difference. In almost every situation that 2nd Battalion encountered, the reporting procedures used provided a vital link between the ground force commander and the battalion headquarters, thus providing a clear picture of the situation on the ground that allowed the separate staff elements to operate on a continuous planning cycle. Instances occurred, however, where poor reporting and an overreliance of digital communications technology resulted in confusion between elements and failure to execute specific tasks. The critical factor for success on the ground is open and clear communication between the executing element and its higher headquarters. By and large, the communication technology and methods employed by 2nd Ranger Battalion resulted in successful combat operations in an extremely difficult area of operations.

Captain Kirby R. Dennis was commissioned in 2000 from the U.S. Military Academy. He served as a rifle platoon leader and executive officer with the 2nd Battalion, 75th Ranger Regiment, and has participated in deployments as part of both Operation Enduring Freedom and Operation Iraqi Freedom. At the time this article was written, he was attending the Infantry Captain's Career Course at Fort Benning. His next assignment is with the 3rd Brigade Combat Team at Fort Carson, Colorado.