

TRAINING AFGHAN SOLDIERS:

A TECHNIQUE FOR BUILDING RAPPORT WITH YOUR COUNTERPARTS

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Counterinsurgency is called graduate level warfare, and for good reason, the dynamics of defeating an insurgent while simultaneously training the host nation security force pose a number of challenges.

Afghanistan, a diverse and varied land with a predominately Persian heritage, historically encompasses the area from the Amu Darya in the North to the Indus in the East, to the deserts of Baluchistan to the Khorasan in modern day Iran; In addition to the seven major languages (Dari, Pashtu, Uzbek, Hazara, Tajik, Turkmen, Baloch, and Aimak), there are at least 400 tribes. With this level of diversity, training an indigenous army and police force is demanding.

In our mobile training team in Afghanistan, we use several techniques to build a connection and rapport with our Afghan counterparts. One of those techniques is the use of Afghan history.

When we begin teaching battle staff, tactical operations center (TOC) operations, troop leading procedures or any of the other courses to Afghan NCOs and officers, we always start with an

introduction of ourselves, our military backgrounds, and then we discuss the program of instruction.

For U.S. Soldiers teaching other U.S. Soldiers, this can be relatively easy. We use our rank, past assignments and attendance at the numerous leadership and specialty schools to establish a level of knowledge and competence within our area of expertise. Within the first five or 10 minutes of a presentation, Soldiers would know what kind of instructor you are and may fairly judge your level of competence.

With Afghan soldiers, this technique does not work and has no relevance or meaning for them. They do not understand fully what it means to have earned the rank of an NCO in the U.S. Army. Neither do they associate the level of power, authority, experience and initiative that an American NCO has and is allowed to wield.

Additionally, other traditional western methods don't always work, such as telling a joke, because the joke often does not always translate very well. Nevertheless, during the very first few minutes



Photos courtesy of author

Dr. Terry Tucker questions a group of students about their work during a map reading class in Afghanistan.



During a CPX, Afghan police officers refer to a map to conduct battle tracking and reporting.

of our class we know that we still need to rapidly establish a connection in order to earn the Afghan soldiers' respect and attention.

The students, both officers and NCOs, are always a varied age group from young to middle age. One of the training techniques that we use to establish a connection with our Afghan soldier students is the use of Afghan history and how that history relates to training and the Afghan Security Forces.

We have several Afghan historical figures that we use in the introduction. Afghan popular history has a myriad of famous people to pick from. One example is Sultan Mahmud of Ghazni. He was the ruler of the Ghaznavid Empire and extended his rule to include modern day Afghanistan, Pakistan, portions of India and most of Iran. Sultan Mahmud is a celebrated national hero of Afghanistan and is considered a great patron of the arts, architecture and literature. Persian historians such as Abolfazl Beyhaghi and Ferdowsi give shining descriptions of the magnificence of his capital, as well as of the conqueror's support of literature. Sultan Mahmud transformed Ghazni, the first center of Persian literature, into one of the leading cities of Central Asia. The Persian historian and poet Ferdowsi wrote the national epic of the Persian-speaking people, *Shahnameh*, the Book of Kings, and presented this opus to Sultan Mahmud. To be sure, for the historian there are scholarly differences over some of the details of these two men; however, Afghan

popular history paints these figures in a very positive light.

We also use the example of Achmed Shah Durranni; he was a warrior king, poet and administrative genius who rose from the rank of personal servant to king of an empire. The Shah was selected by a council, a Loya Jirga, for both his martial prowess and his statesmenlike qualities. He ultimately extended the empire to include Kashmir, the Sind, the Punjab in the East, the Amu Darya River in the North and Mashdad in modern Iran in the West.

As we progress we sometimes also mention several other key historical people such as: Rabi Balkhi, Shah Rukh, and Uleg Beg. We use these examples, plus many more during the course of our instruction to do several things. First, we use Afghan recognized national and popular history in an attempt to drive a sense of Afghan purpose. We maintain historical accuracy; we briefly relate the major highlights in history in a way to promote a wider sense of Afghan nationalism and pride in the Afghan Army.

For instance,

there are examples of American popular history that immediately convey a sense of American values, mores, perceptions and patriotism. Some literary and Hollywood examples of this popular history that convey a certain American spirit include: *The Birth of a Nation*, *The Alamo*, *Battle of the Bulge*, *Roosevelt's Rough Riders*, *Fallen Angels*, *Patton*, *the Longest Day*, *Last of the Mohicans*, *Saving Private Ryan*, *All Quiet on the Western Front*, *We were Soldiers Once and Young*, *Band of Brothers*, *Glory*, and *Gods and Generals*.

These examples maintain a certain basic level of historical accuracy, but more importantly, they emphasize a certain spirit, values, mores, patriotism, and unity. Likewise, we attempt the same with our Afghan soldier students when we relate the stories of famous Afghan leaders and warriors. Our interpreter has been invaluable in this process.

Secondly, we use these examples, to establish a common link of understanding and to attempt to establish a bond — a bond between people and soldiers — who have a similar bond and history and share adversity, education, arts, and growth with all its values and spirit. Because our Afghan students vary in age, it's easy to forget they also bring a variety of combat experience to the classroom as well. Many of our students are ex-Mujahid. Culturally, they must be able to save face; we explain that we respect that they know how to fight, but we are going to give them skills and soft tools to make them better fighters.

In this process we rely extensively on our interpreter and ensure that we are well-rehearsed and that there are no translation surprises for either of us that would cause



An MTT class poses for a photo with its instructors and translators.

harm and undue cultural insensitivity.

Another technique that is critical to success is to be sure that you speak in short sentences so that the translator can keep pace. Additionally, allow a buffer of extra time to teach a class because of the time required for translation and explaining simple words and concepts that we might normally take for granted.

I have been duly surprised when something I thought would be difficult to grasp was quickly understood, and, likewise when I thought a simple concept could be explained in a few minutes resulted in a 40-minute discussion. If you find them grasping the training session quickly and expect to finish early with your training then go back to the beginning, summarize the key points and conduct one more repetition of the task. Also, have one or two questions that you can use for opportunity training that directly relate to the subject. The Afghan education system, for those fortunate enough to go, also places a heavy emphasis on repetition.

There will be amazing revelations in each and every training session. One recent example of this includes a training session in military graphics and symbology. We were using the ANA doctrinal manual on symbology to practice posting enemy symbology on a map. One of the students pointed to one of the graphics and told the translator that the description was an idiom. I was surprised by this and was at first confused. I queried the soldier through our interpreter in an effort to understand what he actually meant. After several minutes of questions we realized that the symbol for an enemy boobytrap actually translates from the English "booby trap" to the Dari of "satan's trap." This is a classic example of some of the cultural and transliteration challenges that occur on a regular basis.

On a more humorous note, one of our students was wasting time and had been slightly recalcitrant in getting back on track to the lesson. After a few minutes he pointed to the other instructor on



One of the instructors "Tommy" stands behind the corps commander during an MTT in Afghanistan.

our team and asked me if the other instructor was "Hazara." I grabbed at the opportunity; this has happened before and "Tommy" was well prepared for this question. I immediately told the student yes and then told that to Tommy. Tommy told the student he was a Hazara and then asked the student through our translator if he knew who his cousin was. Tommy then took the student and translator over to our photo board of previous students and pointed to the Afghan corps commander, who is also Hazara, and said that the corps commander was his cousin. The student almost turned pale and then went immediately back to the map board to finish his work; he was a model of behavior for the remainder of the session.

In closing, the techniques that we learned and practiced at home station do not always assimilate or translate very well in a foreign culture. Like COIN, techniques that worked last week in one province or district do not work the following week in a different province or district. The learning curve for establishing credibility with your Afghan counterpart can be high and set you back in developing a solid relationship unless you are quick to innovate and adapt your training techniques very quickly to the local culture.

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Cultural Awareness Resources Available

There are numerous resources on cultural awareness available for Soldiers who would like to do additional research.

The Command and General Staff College's Combined Arms Research Library has a web page listing some of these resources. The site includes the Combined Arms Center Commander's Cultural Awareness Reading List, a compiled list of journal articles and other documents relating to cultural awareness, and lists of Department of Defense and non-DoD Internet sites that may be of interest. The Web site is <http://www-cgsc.army.mil/carl/resources/biblio/cultaware.asp>.

Other internet sites that may be of interest are:

The Center for Army Lessons Learned (CALL) - <http://call.army.mil/>

The Defense Language Institute Foreign Language Center - <http://www.dliflc.edu>

The Training and Doctrine Command (TRADOC) Culture Center - <http://www.universityofmilitaryintelligence.us/tcc>

The U.S. Marine Corps Center for Advanced Operational Culture Learning - <http://www.tecom.usmc.mil/caocl>

The Air Force Culture and Language Center - www.au.af.mil/culture