

OFFENSIVE DISRUPTION:

Separating the Enemy from the Population through Lethal Fire and Maneuver

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Our aircraft touched down mid-morning on May 12, 2007, on a small landing zone inside of Forward Operating Base (FOB) Tillman, which is located in Lawara Mundi, Afghanistan. The flight from Khowst was just minutes to my new home for the next 15 months, and I had no idea of the significance of my impending role as commander of the remote FOB. Within 12 hours of hitting the ground, I was quickly introduced to the strategic importance that the forces operating from there hold.

Acute surveillance from adjacent observation posts detected the movement of more than 40 heavily armed enemy personnel. The enemy formation was quickly fixed by a barrage of artillery and mortar fire from the FOB. This action allowed time for the muster of a combined arms strike incorporating close air support, attack aviation, organic and attached indirect fire assets and a synchronized joint Afghan and American ground assault element. The end result of the 12-hour engagement was 25 confirmed enemy killed and 15 others wounded or missing.

The subsequent exploitation of the engagement area suggested the enemy's objective was deep within eastern Afghanistan. Several other large-scale enemy infiltrations in this area were attempted throughout our deployment, but due to the heavy losses suffered, each successive attempt involved fewer personnel and focused its objective much closer to the border. As the deployment progressed, we noticed an increase in enemy activity originating within Afghan territory. It was apparent that the enemy had sidelined its massive movements through this area and had adapted by sending smaller al-Qaeda, Hiqqani Network and Taliban facilitators to gain momentum with small homegrown enemy elements already present in Afghanistan.

In this article, I share my experience commanding the counterinsurgency effort throughout Gayan, southern Spera, eastern Orgune and northern Bermel Districts of Paktika Province, Afghanistan. Specifically, I emphasize the unique challenges that



Courtesy photos

Paratroopers from 1st and 2nd Platoons conducting site exploitation discovered a large Taliban cache after a night close ambush in Paktika Province.

my unit and I faced along the northern Waziri border of Pakistan and Afghanistan. I have baselined my experience in the fundamentals of contemporary counterinsurgency (COIN) operations, but focus on our ability to stay on the offensive and disrupt enemy efforts to attack our formations.

COIN In Afghanistan

Conducting COIN operations in eastern Afghanistan, as anywhere, incorporates a balance of offensive, defensive, and stability operations. The contemporary insurgency in the north Waziristan border region of Spera, Gayan and northern Bermel has its own unique context. The region's proximity to resource-rich training and staging areas in Pakistan and the inconsistency of Pakistani military interdiction of cross-border enemy operations are compounded by the fence-riding apathy of the Afghan Waziris. As commander of this problematic area, I was charged with bolstering local support for the fledgling Afghan government and further developing the way ahead to a new and somewhat contemporary existence of the people living here. In accomplishing this daunting task, I was forced to utilize every lethal and non-lethal weapon available.

The typical linear progression of counterinsurgency operations — from separating the enemy from the population to transforming the environment — occurred in multiple layers and was extremely diverse even across the small area of operations (AO) assigned to my unit. Progress was measured by “net gains” as opposed to “total victory.” In other words, no one battle ever decided the ultimate success or failure of our efforts in any particular village. Where one village was receptive to a particular method along the spectrum, another would be adamantly opposed to a similar technique.

The focus throughout the deployment remained on the people, but was facilitated by the significant lethal success we experienced across the AO. The number of enemy we killed was the least effective measure of success. However, our ability to provide freedom of

maneuver to our main effort of engaging the local populace and winning of hearts and minds was gained through a planned offensive disruption.

I could write a book on the complexities of our counterinsurgency efforts, but instead will focus on our most notable successes in separating the enemy from the population through lethal fire and maneuver. The following paragraphs take you through our successes and failures in hopes of affording similar or follow-on commanders the ability to build on our gains in this one aspect of COIN.

Separating the Enemy from the Population

Consistent presence was necessary to deny the enemy freedom of maneuver throughout our area of operations. As I mentioned before, the stages of counterinsurgency occurred in layers depending on the region we visited. To address this issue, each region of our AO was labeled based on the relative threat present there.

No area was completely permissive, but areas sustaining the least number of

historical attacks and those with no recent reported enemy activity (within 90 days) were labeled as green. Semi-permissive areas that typically were affected by temporary or transient enemy elements and had experienced isolated attacks on U.S. and partnered Afghan forces were represented as amber areas. Non-permissive areas where known enemy formations were either embedded in the population or remained due to sheer isolation from our firepower were labeled red areas.

Each area was met with different planning and preparation requirements utilizing the broad assessment tool above, the range of our weapons systems (relative battlespace), the terrain and the number and type of enablers we were able to acquire prior to each operation.



Disarmed enemy rockets line the ground following an attack on an observation post in Afghanistan.

Staying on the Offensive

The best defense is a good offense, and in my experience in command at AO Attack it was no different. The second that we became static or developed a pattern, we were attacked and had to regain the initiative. This was apparent in both defensive screening roles (such as at our observation posts) as well as on patrol. While maintaining force protection on the FOB or conducting screening operations of the Lawara Dashtah, it was important to maintain thorough historical data of recent attacks.

The idea that the enemy can only attack you from so many different locations and ways is true. A solid terrain analysis, understanding of the capabilities of your on-hand Intelligence, Surveillance and Reconnaissance (ISR) assets, and access to historical data are powerful tools in determining the enemy's most likely course of action. This general targeting method coupled with an active hostile intent direct and indirect fire plan was extremely effective in disrupting many attacks on our fixed positions.

On patrol, whether conducting key leader engagements or infilling to a deliberate offensive operation, we always tried to maintain an element of disruption. Whether this effect was achieved by task organization or the specific scheme of maneuver, it enabled my company to meet the enemy on our own terms and truly defined the overall success of our fight. Again, I believe that our success in the AO can largely be attributed to addressing all real-time ISR and terrain analysis with a bold disruption element.

During May and June of 2007, accurate



Hill tops and surrounding high ground provide Taliban indirect fire cells excellent line of sight as well as plenty of cover.

indirect fire attacks on our FOB were a daily event with 107mm rockets and 82mm mortars impacting inside the wire on multiple occasions. The Q-36 radar acquired the majority of the points of origin to the south of the FOB while corresponding signal intelligence (SIGINT) and human intelligence (HUMINT) reports indicated that the cell was operating out of a village near these points. In response, I planned a series of key leader engagements there and in adjacent villages as not to lead the enemy to believe we were targeting one specific location. Simultaneously, I inserted a joint platoon deep into the mountains overwatching the villages.

Though the key task for the element was to determine the pattern of life for the villages after our engagements, we were also able to determine the most likely routes of enemy infiltration to their attack positions from their perspective. While moving to a final overwatch position of the village of Mamadi, this maneuver paid off. Just as the sun was setting on our third night, a rocket cell moved to establish a nearby firing point. Assuming the mounted leader engagement patrol was the only coalition element operating in the area, the enemy began their attack completely unaware of our observation.

Due to our position on a steep hillside, the cell was able to fire six rockets from a BM-1 launcher at the FOB. However, because we witnessed the launch, I was able to quickly provide ample early warning to my company command post (CP) that enemy rounds were inbound. I subsequently called for a 10-round sweep-in-zone from attached 105mm Howitzers on both the enemy rocket launch site as well as their suspected choice of egress. The counter-battery proved extremely effective and on target, wounding two of the members of the cell while canalizing them into the telegraphed egress route. While continuing to adjust on their position, we effectively fixed the enemy element for follow-on attack aviation which engaged and killed them at close range.

Keeping the enemy guessing where all of our elements were located was just as psychologically destructive as seeing their comrades killed en masse. As the deployment progressed, we began to exploit this success by developing it as a consistent tactic with multiple methods of execution.

Disruption was achieved through simulated vehicle breakdowns and long-

range dismounted patrols paralleling mounted infiltration to objective (OBJ) areas. Covert dismounted overwatch of humanitarian aid distributions and key leader engagements also proved successful. Additionally, the establishment of forward SIGINT collection OPs to complement static assets operating out of the FOB was an extremely effective means of finding the enemy first.

This effort was more than just a doctrinal overwatch, it was a calculated preemptive counterattack at a time and place for which the enemy was unprepared.

How to Win

Two good examples come to mind when taking advantage of the enemy's poor signal security (SIGSEC) practices. While conducting refit from extended operations in Spera District throughout early September, enemy elements began organizing an attack on FOB Tillman. VHF intercept of enemy courses of action and consolidation of forces were received from our static Prophet team on a nearby observation post. After analyzing the lines of bearing and signal strengths of the transmissions, it was apparent that multiple enemy OPs were reporting on coalition activities and providing early warning of our movements. In order to drum up more traffic and further expose the locations of the enemy, I ordered the establishment of a forward dismounted SIGINT OP three kilometers west of the FOB. The establishment of the OP allowed the company to receive "cuts" of the enemy location placing their positions to the west and south of the new OP.

Just as I began to develop an offensive indirect fire plan to disrupt the impending attack, the forward OP came under heavy small arms fire. The OP commander's quick reporting along with the CP's analysis of the enemy locations, allowed for an immediate and overwhelming response from 81mm mortars out of the FOB as well as heavy weapons from the OP's supporting vehicular patrol base. The contact lasted approximately 30 minutes whereby the enemy element was repelled and several were wounded. Throughout the fight, only one U.S. Soldier on the OP was wounded after being hit by an AK-47 round that lodged in the night vision goggle mount of his helmet.

Despite the fact that the OP came under fire first, we still met them on our terms. The analysis of their location and isolation of

their assault element by the emplacement of the OP caused them to initiate the attack prematurely. This action exposed the enemy's precise locations and ultimately disrupted their ability to focus combat power on our elements.

Towards the end of September this tactic was again successful. This time, multiple disruption elements were utilized to ensure our mission success. The purpose of the company patrol was to facilitate a shura with the mayor and elders of Gayan regarding the increased amount of direct fire and improvised explosive device (IED) attacks on American and Afghan forces in the Gayan Valley. The shura was conducted at the ASG and ANP-held firebase in the north end of the Gayan Valley. It is important to note that at the time, terrain restricted movement to and from the firebase on a single infil and exfil route, making it a favorite target of enemy ambushes and IEDs.

The company minus element was task-organized into two sections. The lead element cleared the high ground adjacent the route to an overwatch position which supported the HQs and security element for the last two kilometers into the shura site. Deception was built into the plan as the overwatch element conducted a hasty reconnaissance of a spur route west of the overwatch position before simulating a vehicle breakdown back at the junction of the two routes. Before the recon deception effort stepped off, the security element at the shura site established a SIGINT OP to provide VHF cuts of the enemy as they observed both the shura and the deception element.

The combination of deception with overwatching collection again gained us the advantage we needed to find and fix the enemy first. To exploit the upper hand, two five-man dismounted recon and surveillance patrols were conducted to clear the dead space surrounding our OPs and as a deception effort. These elements never ventured outside of support from heavy weapons to ensure that immediate suppression could be achieved in the event they were engaged first.

As the shura and supporting humanitarian aid (HA) distribution came to a close, imminent threat VHF intercepts began to pour in through our SIGINT OP. The enemy voice traffic referenced the movement of our deception element as their target of opportunity. With this information, I

directed all elements to take cover and observe all likely enemy locations based on the line of bearing (LOB) provided by our signal collection asset. According to analysis of the LOBs, it appeared as if an ambush was being established on both sides of our egress route.

Shortly after receiving the enemy traffic, our eastern recon and surveillance (R&S) patrol supporting the deception effort made contact with five heavily armed enemies in a wash paralleling the simulated vehicle breakdown site. One enemy was brought down immediately at a range of 20 meters with M-4 and M-203 fire while the four other fighters bounded east under heavy PKM fire and hand grenades while sustaining multiple gunshot and fragmentary wounds themselves. The element in contact was supported 200m to the west on the opposite side of the route by another R&S patrol with M-240B fires.

While situational awareness was being relayed, HQs and the security element moved to support the element in contact in attempt to cut off the enemy's egress route to the east. While attempting link-up, the remainder of the enemy ambush consisting of approximately 10 fighters engaged the reaction force from both sides of the wash. First contact was made from the high ground to the west of the route, followed by close range PKM fire on the rear vehicle in the convoy from the east. Lead elements out of contact maneuvered to the edge of the kill zone to support with 60mm mortar fires on the high ground, while attached Afghan National Police and their mentors assaulted through the machine gun position to the east.

The contact resulted in the death of the enemy commander of the operation, four confirmed enemy wounded with several others being wounded in the subsequent contact on our reinforcements. In this example, the deception effort generated situational awareness on the enemy location which led to the isolation of the ambush's main effort that lied in wait in the adjacent eastern wash. The contact made by our R&S patrol successfully disrupted the enemy's ability to mass fires on our element in a complex ambush as we exfilled the shura. Only one U.S. Soldier was wounded throughout the one-hour firefight, sustaining a gunshot wound to his wrist.

Our failure to observe the benefit of continuous disruption always resulted in our loss of the initiative. We were extremely lucky on multiple occasions to not sustain significant losses that were directly attributed to our inability to disrupt or lack of maneuver. It was easy to let the terrain, climate and the high operational tempo draw us into a complacent and static posture.

How to Lose

Early in the deployment, a recognized road was nonexistent in our AO. Mounted travel from village to village was executed along track in stream routes that resembled something out of an off-road magazine more than a passable maneuver lane. While patrolling to Torah Wrey in June, we sustained two broken ball joints and two severed half-shafts on the same vehicle that kept us stationary in a canyon for nearly three hours.

OPs were immediately established, to protect the repair site, but no attention was paid to the route ahead of us. Essentially, we had local security

but could not account for even the next kilometer of route between us and our objective. Though the OPs to the north and south had excellent observation, they were stagnant and could not address the multitude of infil routes and firing positions immediately enroute to our OBJ.

After several hours, the vehicles were fixed and we continued to push toward our objective. Not 500 meters from the break-down site, the rear section of the ground assault convoy (GAC) was engaged with rocket-propelled grenades (RPGs) and small arms fire from five enemy personnel on the northern wall of the canyon.

Traveling overwatch allowed the lead element to flank the enemy as the trail element suppressed with heavy weapons and RPGs from our attached Afghan element. Two A-10s were on station from the outset of the attack which further discouraged the enemy from staying and fighting us, but they were unable to acquire their egress. After firing 60mm mortars from the lead section, the enemy broke contact and successfully exfilled without a scratch. We were lucky... all six enemy RPGs missed their mark by inches and only one Afghan soldier received minor shrapnel wounds in the engagement.

Though the reaction to contact was nearly textbook, the contact could have been avoided altogether. I quickly learned to conduct hasty enemy analysis producing most likely and most dangerous courses of action at every long halt. We then took the offensive to clear those infil lanes and firing positions. As opposed to emplacement of static OPs, we maneuvered with overwatch through R&S elements to take the enemy's options away from him before he had a chance to set up.

Another incident occurred in the vicinity of Torah Wrey in October that had similar results due to our lack of initiative. This time, the patrol was conducting a long halt while the leadership and Afghan forces executed leader engagements and a village assessment of the surrounding qalats. The patrol base was situated at the junction of two major washes with dense cornfields surrounding the vehicle patrol base and overwatched by high ground to the northeast and due south. I made the call to strong point the south end of the patrol base with heavy weapon primary directions of fire covering the high ground to the south that I assessed as the most likely enemy attack by fire location.



Paratroopers secure the area following a short battle with Talib fighters in Afghanistan.

Additionally, I maintained the majority of my dismounts to cover our flanks from close range assault from the surrounding cornfields. We had sustained a substantial close range ambush from a cornfield earlier in the deployment that destroyed a vehicle and drove me to pay more attention to these highly concealed areas.

As the key leader engagements ended and the HQs element made its way back in the southern end of the patrol base, an attack was initiated from the high ground to the south. Again, several RPGs and a heavy amount of small arms fire rained down on the patrol base before our heavy weapons could begin to suppress. Though a 105mm target had been established on the high ground, weak communications with our CP at FOB Tillman prevented a timely immediate suppression mission from being executed. Instead, we again relied on our 60mm mortars in direct-lay to further suppress and force the enemy to break contact. Due to the location of the patrol base in relation to the attack position and its linear configuration, it was difficult to quickly maneuver on the element and they successfully egressed without incident. Attack aviation arrived 20 minutes after the contact ceased and were unable to reacquire the enemy element.

Considering the key leader engagement and village assessment took nearly an hour and a half, I believe a clearance of the most likely enemy attack positions would have been well worth my time and would not significantly have degraded my capability to defend the patrol base. One thing is for sure, my lack of maneuver ensured the enemy had a chance to find a suitable firing position and to fire first. Our inaction placed us on the defense from the start and at considerably greater risk of sustaining multiple casualties as the enemy element was

afforded the opportunity to mass their firepower. If it were not for poor enemy marksmanship and an overwhelming powerful reaction from our gunners, things could have definitely turned out for the worse.

I can't emphasize enough the importance of understanding the capabilities and employment techniques of all finding and fixing assets you are allocated. All of these assets play a key role in degrading the enemy's ability to focus combat power. However, be it CAS, attack aviation, ISR, indirect fires or non-lethal fires, they cannot stand alone in reaching this effect. They are never properly applied to reach a suitable course of action to counter the enemy without an intimate knowledge of your terrain.

It is important to stress that terrain analysis from your CP alone is not sufficient. You must know the ground as well as the enemy does. A 1:50,000 map of Afghanistan's mountainous regions does not do the terrain the justice it deserves. Every opportunity we had to gain the high ground, walk the washes and cuts and look back at our positions from the enemy's perspective, we took advantage of. We made mental and digital records of as many portions of the AO as possible. This supported the reconnaissance principle of patrolling by attempting to "never go anywhere for the first time."

Understanding that the enemy is an opportunist, it was critical to remain active, taking away his options and avenues to strike first. Our ability to disrupt the enemy effectively provided freedom of maneuver to our main effort on every mission. As a result, we were able to focus the majority of

our efforts on the more complex and more effective non-kinetic aspects of the counterinsurgency. As a complement to our lopsided kinetic engagements, we exploited the success through a strong Information Operations campaign. This created great confidence in the joint U.S. and Afghan force's ability to secure our areas and in-turn produced larger and larger amounts of actionable HUMINT.

Throughout the deployment, we made a conscious effort to meet the enemy on our terms. We ensured he was never able to bring the full power of his weapon systems to bear on our formations through active disruption. Our spin of basic infantry maneuver doctrine was nothing earth-shattering or really anything that hasn't been done before. However, it was effective and the cost-to-benefit resulting from these efforts was miniscule. Our persistent disruption throughout the deployment resulted in extremely low friendly casualties throughout an excess of 30 enemy direct fire and offensive engagements.

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Paratroopers with the 1st Battalion, 503rd Infantry conduct clearing operations. Gaining the high ground allowed the Soldiers to maintain the initiative at all times when dismounted.

