

COIN OPERATIONS IN AFGHANISTAN

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There are many factors that dictate success or failure in counterinsurgency (COIN) operations, and these outcomes are largely determined on how the unit handles the specific opportunities presented in its unique battlespace. As Infantrymen, we are asked to do many very disparate tasks, which requires that we develop a large skill set so that those tasks can be accomplished. Traditionally, an Infantryman's job is to close with and destroy the enemy. This role changes significantly in a counterinsurgency fight. The Infantry Soldier is asked to not only find and kill the enemy, but to train an indigenous force, help establish a stable government, assess village living conditions, pass out humanitarian aid (HA), treat sick or wounded locals, build structures, fix roads, utilize engineer and construction abilities, along with the myriad of other responsibilities that come from properly building and maintaining working relationships.

There are three basic tools that have proven successful in managing all these tasks and "winning the hearts and minds:"

- * Gaining trust through building relations with the indigenous population;

- * Distribution of humanitarian aid coupled with infrastructure development; and

- * Mentoring the various government forces so that they can provide security for their own people.

These three premises are dependent on each other; one must do all three well in order to have impacting effects in the battlespace.

Building the Relationship

A unit's leaders build relationships through constant interaction with the local populace and Afghan forces. The establishment of a strong relationship requires more than just an occasional village visit; it is imperative that leaders get to know the people as individuals. The unit leadership should know the village elders' names, their tribe, and their unique tribal history. I would also encourage leaders to learn the names of some of the children, local shopkeepers, and farmers; they will prove to have useful information from time to time. The more locals that recognize the leader as a familiar friend — one that is committed to them and not someone they or their children should fear — then the better the chance the leader has to build a bridge between the host nation government and its people. By genuinely listening to the people and addressing their concerns, leaders can help actively facilitate relationship building. It is important that the unit, not just the leadership, act in kind — have the gunners wave to the locals as the convoy passes through the villages (see how many locals actually wave back and use that as a measurement of support over the months).

When the lead truck stops to search a vehicle or while setting up a hasty traffic check point (TCP), the leader needs to speak with the individual, treat him with respect by thanking him and shaking his hand, and wishing him well on his journey after the search is complete. Through these types of interactions, the unit will slowly

Soldiers with the 1st Battalion, 503rd Infantry Regiment quiz children on their school curriculum before distributing humanitarian aid.

Photos courtesy of author



have success, and individuals will begin to come forward with valuable information about the situation in the area of operations (AO). Be an expert on the history of the assigned battlespace by knowing the tribes, sub-tribes, village origin, family disputes, etc; the more a leader knows and the more knowledge he has, the more ground he will gain.

Before conducting a leader engagement, ensure security is established and an overwatch position is in place covering all possible exfiltration routes out of a village. Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF) — whether that be the Afghan National Army (ANA), the Afghan National Police (ANP), the Afghan Border Police (ABP), or the Afghan Security Group (ASG) — should request for the village elders to escort the unit into the town. If it is or becomes necessary for the unit to conduct a search through the compounds while the leadership is meeting, permission should be requested first. Success in leader engagements has been created by knowing the villages and occasionally quizzing the children on school curriculum before discussing the talking points with the adults. It is vital that the leadership be seen as men first and Soldiers second, so that tribesmen and the unit leaders can share common ground as individuals in order to make progress towards building trust and relationships.

Once the leaders of the village have opened up, a smooth transition into village assessments and issues can be made. These issues and assessments include potential future projects, security, education, active participation and support of the government through joining the police force, ANA, and attending Shuras. Most village elders do not mind if pictures are taken and their information is recorded, but always ask permission and explain why (so that they can be identified by name and to help better build on the relationship between his village and the unit).

At the bare minimum have at least one ANSF leader present during the engagement. This consideration will not only put an Afghan face on the meeting, but it can lead into recruitment and a question and answer session with a government representative. The relationship displayed between the coalition and Afghan leaders is as important as that of a platoon leader and platoon sergeant or



Afghan tribal elders celebrate the first election of a sub-governor for the Gomal District.

a company commander and first sergeant. When an engagement is finished and the unit leaves the village, the Afghans talk. It is human nature to want to be part of a strong team or community, one that takes care of each other and provides opportunity. By showing this united front with strong bonds, Afghan tribes will not only be interested, but it will stir inspiration among those who want to better their lives and those of their families. Always rehearse the talking points with the Afghan counterpart to ensure the values and vision are shared.

The long term effects of winning a COIN fight are how these people will remember the footprint American Soldiers left in their country. It is about our character, our kindness, and our generosity. The Afghans have strong feelings of distrust and anger towards the Soviets. We must consider how we want to be remembered. If we help construct the base infrastructure for each district to build upon, we will always be recognized for the help and community development that we provided.

It is important that a leader have an area of operations that is not bigger than what he can influence. Visiting a village in the battlespace once a month is hardly winning the COIN fight; it requires tireless effort, an almost “campaign trail” approach in trying to visit each village at least once or twice a week if possible. Gomal is the largest district in the Paktika Province. It is impossible for one platoon to control and develop Gomal in its entirety. If this is the case in any given battlespace, determine what sphere of influence the unit is possible of having and seek to achieve effects in that targeted area.

Ensuring that the unit has enough dismounts available to engage and interact with the local populace, while still maintaining sound security, is of the utmost importance. Remember, the more a leader believes he is protecting his force by staying grounded to the forward operating base (FOB), the less secure he and his force really are. To truly protect his unit, the leader must get out and live amongst the people and use the FOB to refit and grant down time when necessary.

Be patient with the tribal elders, they have been around long enough to fight and survive for generations. The leadership needs them on their side — that being said, they still have strong beliefs in tribal law and often will not recognize the governmental laws of Afghanistan. The military leader needs their advice, opinions, and support at the weekly Shura meetings. While many of them make overly broad requests, tolerating them with a congenial attitude is what gains ground. For example, at a Shura in the Gomal District, a village elder told the Afghan leadership that the tribesmen will punish people as they see fit, be it killing a man, burning his home down, or killing his family and livestock, depending on the severity of his crime. The Afghan and coalition leadership countered his argument by reinforcing how this only causes deeper tribal tension among villages; in a culture rich in honor and revenge, such acts could be fought over for generations. By allowing the Afghan government to uphold an equal law for everyone and objectively pursue those who disobey, the people do not have to continue the internal

conflicts that run deep in their history.

The weekly Shura should be an organized and efficient meeting, and rest assured it will take time until this landmark is reached. They are accustomed to disorder and chaos, but with coalition mentorship they can become a successful group. Unit leadership must address the issue of representation for each village or tribe in the district (at least one village elder); otherwise, some areas will prosper while others continue to struggle. If there is not a sub-governor or a Shura president, then encourage them to elect both. Help get the Shura established by teaching them about how to run meetings, conduct business, and work together. Always have an agenda, set SMART (specific, measurable, attainable, realistic, and timely) goals, and plan tasks for the follow-up meeting. Provide Shura member ID cards for the elders, military ID cards for the local forces, and write memorandums for the sub-governor and police chief (conduct a follow up on the memorandums with the American counterparts such as provincial reconstruction teams [PRTs] or embedded tactical trainer [ETTs]). Once they grasp the concept, allow the Shura president, sub-governor, and military or police leadership to lead the meeting. Once things seem to be running smoothly, teach the sub-governor, police chief, and Shura president about task organization. Sub-governors are often so overwhelmed with requests, demands, and issues that they can hardly get anything done; so with the support and vote of the Shura, elect members for cabinet positions at the district level (i.e. minister of education, finance, development, agriculture, etc). This gets everyone involved in some aspect of district improvement and allows the sub-governor to manage the Shura rather than being the backstop for complaints. However, be mindful that each elected cabinet minister will naturally look out for his village and sub-tribe before any others in the district (be prepared to counter this). Remember, U.S. forces are guests at the Shura meeting, so encourage the Afghan leaders to conduct the engagement and empower them through battalion and company resources. U.S. forces are there for mentorship, security, and to aid in reconstruction projects. The tribal leaders will never be successful if we do not allow them to be independent; the leadership should quietly support them, but avoid making the locals dependant on the coalition forces for everything. Utilize battalion resources to empower the sub-governor, Shura president, and police chief. There are many resources available at the battalion level so keep organized notes of meetings and requests, and be persistent in getting aid to the district.

Remember to use extreme discretion, caution, and care with both direct and indirect hostile intent fires (HIF); every unit has more firepower than it will ever need in any village, so use disciplined control measures to determine the best course of action if it ever goes kinetic in a populated area. Tactical patience is one of the most important attributes a leader must have in combat. A new unit in country was out on a patrol in a district; they were in an observation post (OP) overlooking a road into the valley, when they spotted two individuals with a shovel down near the road. They immediately took these two locals for insurgents trying to emplace an improvised explosive device (IED) along the route and engaged them, killing one and wounding the other. When they moved down to the engagement area,

they came to see that the wounded individual was just a boy and the one killed was his father. They were attempting to fix a wash out in the road when they were shot. This is the easiest way to lose the trust of the people and possibly never gain it back. This village and sub-tribe will certainly not support the government or coalition forces, and there is a good chance that his son and others may join sides with the insurgents.

HA Distribution and Projects

Humanitarian aid distribution is the most popular and successful way to create a positive image for a unit. Many of the women and children fear coalition convoys as they roll by, but when the vehicles stop and Soldiers distribute supplies or give medical treatment, these locals no longer see the unit as foreign invaders or infidels whom they need to fear. With few exceptions, most of the village elders will not be swept off their feet by the American guests in their country. This lack of support can be helped by focusing on the next generation that will become elders. By gaining ground with them, the ideals of the coalition and Afghan government can flower. If this generation of children remembers us as positive representatives of freedom — individuals that they want to emulate — then the hard work we have put in will have borne good fruit. Get as many supplies and resources from your battalion as possible, and encourage the American public to get involved. Supporters back home have sent a wide variety of goods such as school supplies, candy, toys, dolls, children's clothes, shoes, and games (anysoldier.com, soldiersangels.com, USO, etc). Wheat and corn seed distributions are vital for economic growth in any district, so go the extra step and provide fertilizer as well. The mosque refurbishment kits are not only accepted with open arms by every village, but provide concrete evidence that we support Islam and



Afghan National Army soldiers distribute winter clothing in the Spera District.



A Soldier with the 1st Battalion, 503rd Infantry Regiment teaches a class on personal hygiene in the Gomal District.

are not here to threaten it or its people. This attention will help in the information operations (IO) campaign by not giving the enemy propaganda to use against us.

Giving out HA is one of the more enjoyable experiences for Soldiers. After security is in place and a defendable and safe site is established to conduct the distribution, the leader should afford Soldiers the opportunity to switch out if they want to hand out any supplies. In order to keep things organized, bring the villagers and children in through one search checkpoint and send them out another. As they enter the perimeter, have the children sit down and keep them separate from the adults. The Soldiers can then give the children toys, clothes, school supplies, and candy, while the adults receive the plant seed, flour, sugar, mosque kits, etc. One of the more memorable distributions was when we had a Soldier lead a personal hygiene class for the children. He taught them how to brush their teeth and use soap and shampoo.

Every time we visited that village in the future, the children would come running out grinning ear to ear with their toothbrushes in hand.

It is important to keep an accurate inventory of humanitarian aid and the villages in which it has been distributed. After conducting an initial assessment of the size of a village, cater the HA loads to meet the number of individuals in a village. A leader should always carry HA in each vehicle; it should become part of the vehicle load plan. The unit leadership will come to learn that most villages keep the same list of priorities for HA. The mosque refurbishment kits and solar panels are always highest on the list, followed by cold weather gear and boots in the winter, wheat and corn seed during the harvest months (as well as fertilizer), school supplies for areas with teachers and facilities, and then the rice, beans, flour, hygiene kits, dolls, candy, etc. Allow the ANSF forces on the patrol to distribute the HA also; this courtesy will not only give

power to them, but allow the people to physically see that their government supports them.

Once the leadership has identified the most important development/reconstruction needs of the village (be it a well and hand pump, floodwall, irrigation dam, or school) write up a proposal for the S9 and/or provincial reconstruction team (PRT). Something we were not fortunate enough to have but would have been ideal is an embedded PRT Soldier or liaison with us at all times or even once a month to assess these projects and get things in motion through their channels. Ensure not to allow the villagers to believe they are getting these projects until the contract has been approved; otherwise, the village will quickly lose faith and interest in their government. Follow up on these contracts and provide a timetable to the village so they know when to expect the project to begin. These developmental projects will clearly display to the local populace how the government's actions coupled with the people's cooperation will benefit them.

Development of Indigenous Forces

Developing the indigenous forces is the single most important task in counterinsurgency warfare. It is their nation and the amount of time we spend here in the future depends on Afghans' ability to act and operate independently and allow their government to become stable. Training the Afghan soldiers, regardless of ANA, ANP, or ABP, is not just the job of the embedded training team mentors. If a unit works with them, goes on missions with them and interacts with them, then it becomes their job as well. Do not neglect this duty, because it is paramount to their success. Without constant guidance and supervision at the beginning of the relationship, the Afghan unit has a much greater chance to fail, be it because of ineffectiveness or corruption. Many units lack education, military doctrine or leadership, and proper planning techniques. Treat these soldiers as part of the team by taking care of them and by remembering to teach, coach, and mentor them.

When the unit stays at a district center, combat outpost or small firebase with an indigenous element, it is essential to include them in classes and joint meetings. Allow them to give a class to the unit's men on Afghan customs, courtesies, and culture; in turn, coalition soldiers can give them a class on how to properly conduct searches, raids, and set up traffic control points. Leaders should eat with them (if they can handle the food) and invite them to eat with coalition forces when possible. Teach them about personal hygiene, weapons maintenance, and individual soldier discipline; pair them up with squads for these types of educational classes. The trust and bonds gained through constant interaction will help keep the coalition and Afghan soldiers alive.

Afghans have a culture rich in honor; they will feel obligated to protect the unit as their duty. Train the indigenous element on varying the routes and times of travel, and ask them about enemy signs such as stacked and marked rocks because they know the culture and hidden signs much better than we do. In one district, supportive locals would place a circle of rocks in the road to mark improvised explosive devices (IEDs) for coalition and Afghan convoys; these simple acts of courage undoubtedly saved Soldiers lives. In another district insurgents used rock formations to indicate to the locals where the IEDs were; they also used these rock stacks as aiming stakes on when to initiate an attack or detonate a buried explosive. The unit leadership must train Soldiers to recognize these tactics; they must be alert and aware of the situation at all times regardless whether they are driver, gunner, or passenger. The Afghan soldiers can train the American counterparts to identify such signs while on joint patrols; many from the indigenous element know the terrain and the way the enemy thinks better than anyone in the unit, utilize these individuals because the insight they share is invaluable.

After these missions, build pride within their team by expressing satisfaction for any good work and conducting after action reviews (AARs) with their leadership. Discuss the value of having them on the patrol and give them things to work on before the next mission. If they did something to jeopardize the lives of anyone on the patrol, be sure to mentor the Afghan leadership in proper discipline measures so that it never happens again. Encourage them to conduct local patrols on their own so they can sharpen their skills and become proactive; these patrols are the first step in making them operate independently. It is important to understand that the host nation forces doing some things tolerably is often better than

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the coalition forces doing it well.

While back at the FOB or police center, teach the Afghan counterparts about accountability. Under the leader's supervision, the Afghan leadership should conduct an inventory of all unit-issued equipment at least once a month and hold them responsible for anything missing or not collected from any soldiers who quit. Afghan officials, both soldiers and sub-governors, tend to believe government-issued equipment is their personal property. If someone is fired or quits, they will attempt to keep the weapon, vehicle, uniform, or documents provided. It is imperative that the coalition leadership keeps an eye out for these issues because the equipment can be sold to insurgents, and the vehicles and uniforms can become instruments for suicide bombers and vehicle-borne explosives.

Make contact with their higher headquarters' American counterpart so that the Afghan element can get the support they need. Help fill out supply, wood, fuel, and ammunition requests so that they can be properly equipped on a monthly basis. Never promise the Afghan counterparts anything that cannot be delivered (this goes for the locals, too!). Use the local forces to spread the word on small rewards program for weapons caches and enemy information; occasionally, villagers will feel more comfortable talking with the police chief than the Americans. If the information he provides to the police chief turns out to be accurate, ensure that anonymous informant is paid so others will see how much money they can make by supporting their own government.

These are a few of the techniques we have found success with in the last 15 months. If one of these works one week, it may not the next; if it is well received in one village, it may not be in the next. Each village will be different, and the leadership must tailor their approach based off their initial observation. Because these situations are always fluid, a unit leader must bring dynamic solutions to each individual problem. If the unit leaders and Soldiers bring the proper tactics and attitude coupled with energy and efficiency to their area of operations and do not simply go through the motions, it will be a highly rewarding and successful deployment for both the locals and the unit. The coalition forces are the ambassadors of freedom for their battlespace, once the locals get a taste of the opportunity for a better life, they will inevitably crave the possibilities to have such. However, stay committed to the cause because success is only granted through tireless effort.

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