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Personal Experience Paper of Dwight C. Utley

Dwight C. Utley, SGM, 18Z

Operation "ENDURING FREEDOM", Konar Valley, Afghanistan, May 15 – December 1, 2004

18Z5, Operations Sergeant, C Company, 2nd Battalion, 3rd Special Forces Group (Airborne)

Fort Bragg, North Carolina 28310

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Abstract

I have deployed four times in support of Operation ENDURING FREEDOM (OEF), the third rotation is the subject for this paper. The battle space where we operated contained an enemy force that was and is engaged in a full scale guerrilla war that ranged from intimidation of civilians and government of Afghanistan authorities to ambushes, rocket attacks, IEDs and small scale raids. The enemy was a combination of Taliban hardliners, Al-Quaeda soldiers, leadership, and Arab foreign fighters all of them operating on both sides of the Afghanistan-Pakistan border. The intelligence was some of the most difficult to sort out, the majority of it was human intelligence (HUMINT) and it all came with an agenda, everything from monetary motivation to tribal feuds. Once the intelligence was sorted out making the operational cycle respond was its own challenge, however the support ODA 364 received was phenomenal, AC-130s, A-10s or AH-64s supported the majority of our operations. The other end of the operational spectrum was our 160 man Afghan Security Forces (ASF) infantry company. These Soldiers had been recruited, trained and equipped by US Special Forces over the course of the war. These men all hated Al-Quaeda, Arabs and the Taliban and they were always ready to go at a moments notice. ODA 364 conducted 41 Large- scale operations during the seven months that we were in the Konar Valley, the most productive operations were the direct action mission at Hadji Mir Alam Khan's house and the cordon and search in the Korengal Valley. All operations conducted were combined arms efforts with the ASF providing the manpower, Army Aviation and the US Air Force providing the fire support, and ODA 364 conducting the detailed planning and leadership tasks.

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My Team, Special Forces Operational Detachment Alpha (ODA) 364, was notified in September of 2003 that we would return to Operation Enduring Freedom (OEF) for a third rotation in May of 2004. My team had just completed its second OEF rotation as part of the Combined Joint Special Forces Afghanistan (CJSOTF-A) Direct Action Company. We had participated in 11 company size raids, with only one KIA and one WIA. We had huge results in the form of EKIA and destroyed Al-Quaeda equipment. I was confident that the team was ready.

During the time period from September to March, every team member received 45 days leave and an individual school. In March the entire company went to White Sands Missile Range (WSMR) for an 18 day pre-deployment train-up. WSMR proved to be an excellent choice as the pre-deployment training location. The terrain and weather at WSMR are identical to the environment in OEF. The only major draw back was that we did not have our Afghan Soldiers or Toyota Hi-Lux trucks to train with. The Company's Sergeant Major and Commander's Program of Instruction (POI) consisted of ten days of team training and four days of company training, which culminated with a company raid. Goats, role players and OEF specific scenarios were integrated into the company raid in order to enhance the exercise. The team had been issued new Ground Mobility Vehicles (GMVs) and crew served weapons which we were able to validate at WSMR. Overall, this proved to be excellent pre-deployment training.

We deployed to Bagram Airfield (BAF) and given five days to prepare for infiltration to Asadabad (ABAD). It was necessary that teams complete their preparations in five days or less in order to make room for incoming teams to prepare their equipment. The most important pre-infiltration activities are the Ammunition issue and Operational Funds (OPFUND) issue. This is because nothing happens in Afghanistan without a pay off or a firefight.

The drive from BAF to ABAD is approximately 80 KM however it takes two days. We hired jingle trucks to carry team gear that was not on the gun trucks and extra Class I. The jingle trucks were extremely slow and the roads were treacherous. However we were unable to leave the trucks since they contained team gear.

We arrived at ABAD and begin transitioning with the teams that we were relieving. The previous unit had placed two ODAs in ABAD however my unit was only able to man ABAD with one ODA. The first team that we linked up with, had all of their operational and intelligence information automated, as well as maps and route overlays for us. They also prepared a detailed O&I briefing for us. Their Area of Operations (AO) had been in the Nuristan province and they were adamant that an SFODA presence was necessary there. However there are no roads leading to Nuristan and the only way to get there is by rotary wing air. As I am writing this three US soldiers have been killed in Nuristan which is absolutely an Al-Qaeda strong hold because of its remoteness, access to Pakistan and nearby refugee camps. This team had already drawn down to four soldiers and the briefing was the only transition that we received. They were both unwilling and unable to go to Nuristan with us for an in-depth orientation. Additionally helicopter availability was an issue due to the on going Relief in Place (RIP).

The second team that we RIP'ed with did not have any automated information, maps or overlays. The team operated in the ABAD area; when we suggested that we do a patrol together for orientation the team leadership vehemently objected. The team sergeant informed me that his guys had made it through their rotation with no WIAs or KIAs and they were not going to risk it so close to redeployment.

The ABAD Firebase had a USMC Infantry Company that was responsible for the firebase's security. A Provincial Reconstruction Team (PRT), which was responsible for developing the provincial government, and infrastructure related civil affairs. The crown jewel of the camp's units was a 160 man Afghan Security Force (ASF). The ASF had been recruited and trained by previous ODAs. We would make it our commitment to train and equip the ASF better than they had ever been; taking them to the level of conducting company sized operations with minimal US supervision. The ASF were all from the province, and had all fought against the Taliban, they knew the terrain extremely well and more importantly they knew all of the key personalities both good and bad. During our seven months with the ASF we increased their numbers to 210 and gave them a reconnaissance capability that included sketching, GPS and digital camera operation. Additionally we established an EOD team (the highest paid guys in the company) that dealt with all UXOs and IEDs. We also trained and equipped a heavy weapons platoon that had RPGs and recoilless rifles.

During our "Employment" phase we conducted 41 CONOPS, which included numerous direct action missions, MEDCAPS, intelligence gathering and Force Protection Patrols. The ASF participated in every mission.

The most memorable MEDCAP that we went on was on the top of a mountain about 12KM West of our firebase. Our task organization was ODA 364 and a USMC platoon along with tough boxes of Class VIII, and a 6 wheel ATV with medical supplies water and ammo. We INFIL'ed on a CH-47 and the villagers were amazed to see a helicopter land at their village which was at 9500 FT MSL. Upon our arrival we linked up with a village elder and set up a patrol base behind his house. The next day we had a huge turn out for the MEDCAP- over 400 people. We treated everything from scabies to sinus infections to burns. The funniest thing was

a 50 year old man that told me that his knees hurt. I told him he needed to move out of the mountains of Afghanistan if he wanted his knees to stop hurting. We gave every child a hygiene bag and a toy. During the night while the team was conducting security, we monitored the command net and listened to another team that was in a firefight and had a WIA. The helicopter trying to EXFIL the WIA was having problems with brown out conditions and could not get to the casualty. After multiple attempts the WIA was EXFIL'ed. We EXFIL'ed the next day; the team was frustrated, we had done a low priority humanitarian while other teams were killing bad guys. I felt that the mission was a huge flop because we had not received any actionable intelligence and to make matters worse the rooms that we used to treat the patients were not properly ventilated and 75% of the team got sick the day after EXFIL. My interpreter told me to wait five days before passing judgment on the mission. He was right, after about a week people from the villages surrounding the MEDCAP site started coming in and sending messages with runners about caches and personalities. We were able to interdict some Al-Qaeda operatives transporting explosives and blasting caps from Pakistan to Afghanistan as a result of the information some of the villagers provided. The lesson learned was that nothing happens fast in Afghanistan, and an enduring presence is necessary to accomplish the mission.

One day one of our ASF soldiers came to us and informed that he knew of a house where Bin Laden had spent the night a few years earlier. The homeowner's name was Hadji Mir Alam Khan, and it was commonly known fact that he had Al-Qaeda ties. We did some checking around and it turned out that UBL had stayed at this house after the bombings in Tora Bora. We were able to also associate the house with an IED cell that was providing IEDs and rewards to anyone who would put an IED in the road. Hadji Mir Alam Khan would recruit and train people

from refugee camps in Pakistan and then send them into Afghanistan to emplace IEDs in the roads.

We were able to conduct a close target reconnaissance and develop a plan. The house only had one road leading to it, a small mosque and a river on the East side, mountains on the Northside and a small village to the west. It turned out that the mosque was used like a hotel for foreign fighters traveling back and forth from Afghanistan to Pakistan. Our recce team said that they saw armed men with radios guarding the house which was indicative of a large cache and perhaps some high level Al-Qaeda leadership.

We decided to cordon and search the house and the mosque at first light hoping to catch all of the males at the mosque for morning prayer call. The good news was that the objective was only a 4 minute flight from our firebase. Our task organization had ODA 364, 3 ASF platoons, 2 x AH-64s and 4 x CH-47s supporting us. When we hit the ground the assault force that was securing the mosque (only ASF entered the mosque) captured about seven bad guys and nothing else. The assault force at the house found an empty house. The house was huge and the teams kept clearing empty room after empty room. I was getting worried that the place was going to be a dry hole after weeks of planning and rehearsing. Before entering one of the rooms an ASF Soldier threw a flash bang stun grenade in the room and a fire started. The fire was too big to put out and we had not finished clearing, so we ignored the fire and continued on. By the time that we had cleared the entire house the fire was raging. I walked over and told the commander how pissed I was that this was a dry hole, and the house was on fire we were going to have a hard time doing any type of exploitation of papers/pictures/documents. While we were discussing our next move I began hearing random gunfire. I almost jumped out of my skin- the objective was secure, security teams were in place and we absolutely owned the objective, how could we be

taking fire I asked myself. It turned out that the house was constructed of mud bricks and ammo cans, the entire house was a cache and the ammo was cooking off because of the fire. We pulled everyone off of the objective and had the two AH-64s on station and they leveled the house. They put so much ordnance into the house that two of the Chinooks had to go back to BAF to pick up more rockets. As we were withdrawing off of the objective two of the ASF guys started hotwiring an SUV. They reminded me that we always needed vehicles and that they were going to take this one and assign some guys to drive it back to the firebase. Unfortunately the fire spread so quickly and so much ammo was cooking off that we had to abandon our efforts to get the vehicle started. The ASF guys wound up having an RPG competition as to who could hit the vehicle first. The mission was only a partial success- we had destroyed the cache and grabbed some bad guys but we had not gotten the leader. After a couple of days we had the PSYOPS guys start broadcasting that we knew where the IED cell leader's other houses were and that we were going to burn them down as well if he did not come turn himself into us. It worked, after about three days of spreading the rumor he contacted the Provincial Governor and made arrangements to turn himself in. The mission turned into a double success when he provided information about another Al-Qaeda terrorist. That was one of the best missions ever; it was a total combined arms effort with Special Forces Soldiers conducting the targeting, the planning and the leadership, ASF Soldiers executing the operation and Apaches providing fire support.

ODA 361(another team in the company) was located about 25 KM away in a place called Nangalam, which is right at the end of the Peche Valley. The Peche Valley is one of the toughest places in Afghanistan; the Russians lasted less than 5 days there. There is only one road, which is sandwiched between the Peche River on one side and mountains on the other.

The Mouth of the Peche River opens up into the Konar valley and just four KM away is the Pakistan border. The guys in Nangalam had been ambushed in June and one of the guys had been wounded pretty seriously. By the end of June the base was getting rocketed 3 or 4 times a week. I approached the Company SGM and told him that 364 wanted to reinforce 361 and help them reestablish control of the area. 364 and 361 had guys that were all friends with each other and some of our ASF were related.

We arrived at 361's location and began planning. There was another valley on the South side of the Peche River that was a terrorist sanctuary called the Korengal Valley. The Korengal valley had Arabs, foreign fighters and its own dialect. The guys that had ambushed 361 lived in this valley, and this is where the rocketeers that had been harassing 361's base planned and operated out of. The bad news for us was that the Peche River had no vehicle bridge and the river itself was impassible to vehicles except to Jingle Trucks which are large Russian made two and a half ton trucks. There was no way to get our Gun Trucks across the river.

We finally decided to take Toyota Hi-Lux trucks across the river in the back of jingle trucks (Russian 2 ½ ton commercial cargo trucks). We crossed the river at an adjacent valley and then we crossed over into the Korengal Valley using an old logging trail. The Task Organization wound up about 80 guys in 11 Hi-Luxs. We crossed the river at night and drove all night long; we wound up in Korengal at sunrise. The people were sure surprised to see us. The first thing we did was seize a renegade Afghan Army Post, we took all of their weapons and locked them in their own jail.

After taking over the Army Post we began clearing the village, we cordoned and searched all of the houses that we had intelligence on or looked suspicious. This whole village was bad, every person was rich, there were house with three DVD players, satellite TV and all kinds of

phones including satcom phones and cellular phones. We worked all day and at the end of the day we had about 24 detainees and a bunch of exploitable papers and phones. Plus we destroyed all kinds of IED material, however there were no males in the village and nobody fought. At 1500 local time the entire patrol linked-up at the Army Post, drank all of their cold Pepsis (they had a generator and a small refrigerator) and began the convoy back to the river crossing site. This time we would take the one and only road that led thru the Korengal valley. On the East side of the road was about a 200-foot drop of to the river at the valley floor and on the West side of the road was the side of a mountain. As we were convoying back the lead vehicle radioed the convoy and informed us that they had been ambushed in the spot they were approaching on a previous mission. Approximately 30 seconds after that radio transmission an ambush was initiated on the lead vehicle with machinegun fire. The lead vehicle was disabled and the road was blocked. We now knew where all of the males in the village were, 400M away from us on the other side of the valley engaging us with machineguns and RPGs. The lead vehicle was disabled and the trail vehicle was taking a heavy volume of fire. Everyone had dismounted and we were returning fire, the bad guys were in prepared positions and the heaviest guns that we had were M249s. My gun trucks were sitting in Nangalam collecting dust on the M2s while we were slugging it out with M4s. We requested CAS and got A-10s in about 10 minutes, they came in and dropped 500 lbs bombs and then started making gun runs. The enemy's positions were so well prepared that they would stop firing when the A-10s were on there bombing runs and then resume firing after they pulled away. The lead vehicle was fixed and we began to move out of the Kill Zone. The trail vehicle was disabled so we quickly grabbed all of the sensitive items and blew the vehicle up. A vehicle near the rear of the convoy that contained some sensitive equipment was also disabled. The equipment was too heavy to move so we implemented the

destruction plan for the equipment and then the vehicle. We then were able to move out of the killzone. The A-10's stayed on station and made multiple passes with both bombs and guns. We moved out of the area about 4 KM to the North so we could consolidate and reorganize and get ready for the river crossing.

While updating our higher headquarters we were directed to obtain BDA of the sensitive equipment. The captain and I made a hasty plan, we had brought three ATVs on the patrol, we would ride the ATVs back to the kill zone and get the pictures of the destroyed equipment, and follow the ATVs with the Air force controller, the medic and the team sergeant (myself) in Toyota Hi-Lux. We cross-loaded our ammo, put oil on our weapons and headed back to the kill zone. We also got two Cobra Gunships to support our movement back to the kill zone. After we had gone about one KM one of the ATVs broke down, we pushed the ATV off of the road and put the ATV driver in the back of the Hi-Lux. 500 Meters later the commander's ATV had broken down, we were now down to one ATV. The commander jumped on the back of the ATV that was still operational and they rode that ATV into the kill zone to get the BDA. Exactly at the moment that the ATV with two SF guys in full kit arrived at the objective the chain broke on the ATV and it would not go any further. The commander took pictures of the destroyed equipment and ran along with the ATV Operator to the Hi-Lux that was about 400M away. We then directed the Cobra to destroy the ATV and to re-engage the already destroyed vehicle. The two broken ATVs were not directly in the kill zone and we were able to get one started and tow the other one. The entire element EXFIL'ed without incident, one USMC Lance Corporal had a minor gunshot wound to the leg, and we had lost two pick-up trucks and an ATV. We later determined that we killed 13 bad guys.

In 2005 a four man Navy SEAL reconnaissance element was inserted into the Korengal Valley. A short time later they called on the Iridium phone and said that they were in heavy contact and required emergency EXFIL. An EXFIL A/C was sent and it was shot down. Three of the four men on the reconnaissance team were killed and all sixteen men on the EXFIL A/C were killed. It was a tragic day and testimony to the enemy presence in the Korengal Valley.

Lessons Learned/Insights

The lessons learned from this rotation concern are focused on operations, intelligence and leadership. The operational cycle (OPS Cycle) has one major shortcoming and it is an Army institutional problem. The OPS Cycle is unable to respond in a timely fashion to the Intelligence Cycle. If an individual that had provided quality information in the past walked into the Firebase and announced that a known high ranking terrorist was in the valley, it would take a minimum of two hours to get a helicopter to the firebase. The problem is twofold, one- the helicopters are not co-located with the operational units and two the Concept of the Operation (CONOP) would require at least an hour for staffing and approval. The solution is to co-locate the helicopters at the firebases and give ground force commanders the authority to direct the helicopters' employment.

The intelligence cycle requires an understanding of HUMINT and basic psychology. Information providers have their own motivations and these must be determined prior to the commitment of assets. This is a ground force operator and commander problem, and the only fix is training in interview techniques. One major shortcoming of intelligence is the lack of historical data. The SEALs went into a valley that US Forces had been at least three times before, yet they were not provided any of the previous information. The solution is to assign a historian to each of the Intelligence Centers and insure that he is collecting both historical operational and intelligence data.

Leadership must avoid trying to help ground forces. The ground force commander has to be the supreme authority for the assets that ground forces employ. It is the responsibility of higher leaders to insure the assets that ground force commander wants are available.