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Running Head: COUNTER INSURGENCY OPERATIONS IN KOSOVO

Counter Insurgency Operations in Kosovo

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Abstract

Counter Insurgency Operations conducted in Kosovo by Special Forces ODA 086 in conjunction with the Polish-Ukrainian Battalion underscores how quickly a Peacekeeping mission can turn into a COIN mission. Insurgent forces along the Macedonian border killed two international journalists and three civilians, prompting a relook at how coalition forces conducted operations in that area. The SFODA developed the situation over a two month time, resulting in the confirmation of active insurgent base camps, caches, defensive positions and smuggling routes in previously mined areas inside the Kosovo border. A British Soldier was killed when a reconnaissance vehicle struck a recently emplaced landmine, and a joint/combined patrol came under fire from Macedonian forces securing the border in spite of previous battlespace deconfliction.

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No sooner had I arrived at the Special Forces detachment assigned to the Polish-Ukrainian Battalion (POLUKRBAT) at Camp White Eagle in Kosovo, we were alerted there was significant insurgent activity on the Kosovo-Albanian border near the village of Krivenik. My gear had not arrived yet as I was on the ADVON and had traveled light, so I borrowed some kit, loaded up with ammo, borrowed a radio and headed out the door. Our up-armored Humvee fell in with the unarmored tactical assault vehicles and BMP-2's the Polish contingent was driving. We arrived at Krivenik after a bumpy hour-long drive. The Macedonian military offensive south of the border had pushed the Kosovo Liberation Army (KLA) insurgents north into the Polish sector. Small arms and mortar and artillery fires had been exchanged between the KLA and the Macedonian military (*Krivenik Report*, 2003). Ten to fifteen mortar rounds landed in Krivenik, killing two international journalists, three civilians, wounding several locals and destroying property (*Mortar fire along Macedonian border kills two*, 2001). Tensions were high as casualties were attended to, and the Polish forces gained awareness of the situation. As the sun went down and the chill of the April air began to penetrate the wet and the mud of recent rains, our heavy up-armored Humvee dropped an axle maneuvering up a rocky hill to an overwatch position. Dismounting, I gathered a group of Polish Soldiers with the permission of the ground commander and we began to patrol towards the border. The column of ten Poles and myself sludged silently through the muddy ruts until I suggested to the patrol leader we leave the road and go cross country.

My cursory map reconnaissance showed that this area along the border had been covered with unexploded ordinance (UXO) from the Kosovo air campaign. There were reports of the KLA mining the roads leading south across the border, so I assumed it would be safer to travel

off road in the thick brush than stick to the road which had possible mines or an ambush waiting. Once I convinced the Polish patrol leader this was a good course of action through hand and arm signals (we had no interpreter), we cautiously patrolled about a kilometer at night in a clover leaf fashion, avoiding the road. Just as we were returning to our start point we came across a clearing about 150 meters long and 100 meters wide. One of the Polish Soldiers motioned to the small piles of brown leaves scattered throughout the clearing. Investigating, we quickly determined these were fire-pits that had been carefully camouflaged with branches and leaves – about a dozen camp fires had been in this clearing organized in a concentric fashion. This looked like an insurgent base camp - in the middle of a “mined” area. Returning to our start point we passed on our observations and assisted the recovery efforts of our broken vehicle.

Once the rest of my Special Forces detachment arrived, we discussed the situation and began formulating ideas based on intelligence reporting and recent activity in our sector. Working closely with the POLUKRBAT Commander and his staff, we integrated closely with their operations and began advising on ways to approach the insurgent activity along their southern border. The POLUKRBAT was restricted to Peacekeeping duties and were not allowed to conduct offensive operations. My detachment and I decided further investigation of the border area was warranted due to the amount activity and casualties produced in that area. We requested an M79 grenade launcher and several dozen 40mm illumination grenades from our Special Operations Command and Control Element (SOCCE) located at Camp Bondsteel. This caused some distress with our chain of command who considered that we were to be conducting Peacekeeping Operations, not Counter-Insurgency. Our security situation was unique along the border, and eventually we were able to procure our needed Vietnam vintage M79 grenade launcher and illumination rounds.

The Polish BN CDR gave us a reluctant Polish lieutenant to accompany myself and my weapons sergeant to the border area near Krivenik. It was night, about 2300, as we dismounted onto the chilled Kosovar mountainside. Walking towards the border just the three of us, we would fire an illumination round and wait patiently for it to drift slowly to earth, observing for movement or anything out of the ordinary. After a pause, we would walk forward a hundred meters or so and launch illum again. As we drew closer to the border it became the two of us, as the Polish lieutenant held back and distanced himself from us. After about an hour, we were about 300 meters from the border and on our very last illum round when we saw two interesting things – a line of white tape fluttering in the mountain breeze, and a line of evenly placed mounds of dirt that resembled gopher-hole mounds but were in a straight line. The Baltic moon had risen, giving us light to see by, and my weapons sergeant and myself got close enough to observe the fresh, white tape with “MINE” stamped all along it. The mine marking tape was new and had been strung along a narrow dirt road parallel to a stream bed sunken into the earth and completely covered in overarching trees and shrubs. We marked the location on our GPS and returned to base.

Studying the Mine Action Group charts, intelligence reports and several maps, we determined that the area we had conducted the illum mission had been “cleared “ by the MAG, which means there were still up to 30% uncleared UXO in the area, thus most maps still retained the mine markings. The MAG had not emplaced any new markings in several months, so the mine tape was new and had not been emplaced by MAG. It occurred to us the KLA insurgents were using the mined areas for safe havens, and set out to prove it. Crater analysis from the deadly mortar attack in Krivenik indicated the mortar had been located along or near the southern border, but both Macedonian and KLA forces had denied responsibility for the 5 KIA's.

Deliberate COIN joint mission planning led us to a course of action that included a foot patrol from east to west along the border, through the mined area, terminating at the subsurface tree covered streambed our illumination mission had revealed. Just prior to executing our mission more fighting had displaced some KLA in the same area and a base camp with supplies had been captured by Polish forces. At our request we accompanied a Polish patrol to the border. Dismounting on the border our guide mistakenly took us in the wrong direction east, instead of west. As we walked along the border in broad daylight like tourists naively believing the area was secured, I spied a large bundle of sleeping bags piled up in the trees, followed by ammunition boxes and food. I called out to the Polish guide, thinking this was a great insurgent cache they had uncovered and pointed to my discovery. The Polish lieutenant's eyes got wide as he realized his mistake, and let me know this was not the insurgent base camp but a new cache we had found. Fortunately for us the KLA cache guards had fled the scene instead of firing on us or setting up an ambush, as we found the fresh half eaten snack the guard at dropped when he fled the scene upon our noisy arrival on the trail. We recovered the second largest cache at that location found by the Polish contingent to date – by accident.

Our assumptions being reaffirmed, we set out to conduct our reconnaissance mission the following day. We began by conducting the first Coalition linkup operation with the Macedonian forces who had established a post at the cache location the night before, and explained our mission and intentions. We showed them our uniforms and equipment, line of march, anticipated time of patrol, and exfiltration location and asked them to alert their other border posts to our passing through the area.

The weather was poor, a clinging mist low to the ground, drizzling rain, and temperatures just above freezing. Movement was extremely slow. Our patrol consisted of a Polish Explosive

Ordinance Disposal (EOD) detachment – a lieutenant, and three sergeants, our overweight Serbian interpreter (the only one we had), a Special Forces medic, and myself. The EOD point man was visibly nervous stopped at every spot his hand-held minesweeper registered a beep in his headset. Methodical, edgy, and tedious would describe him well. The rest of the wet patrol began to shiver in the just above freezing rain. It took us about an hour to cover the first kilometer, when we came into a small clearing. Astonishment got our hearts pumping as we realized we were surrounded by well camouflaged covered fighting positions with interlocking fields of fire. The quiet was ominous, and my heart was pounding in my ears as the dripping trees seemed to scream loudly. Cautiously we approached and found the positions had been vacated very recently, perhaps within the last week. We explored the Platoon -plus sized defensive positions and found a mortar pit that had been used and according to the map could easily have ranged Krivenik from that location. We took a GPS grid and continued on our line of march even more cautiously. Our assumption was correct – the KLA was using the mined areas extensively.

After about three hours some members of the patrol were beginning to show signs of hypothermia. The EOD point-man was physically and emotionally wiped out once we arrived the eastern edge of the clearing which signaled we were near the end of our patrol. The terrain was too steep and wooded for line of sight communications, so we sent the SF medic, our fat Serbian interpreter, and several EOD Soldiers to walk up the mountain about a kilometer until they could call the exfiltration vehicles forward. The three of us remaining patrolled across the open field to the mine tape at the edge of the stream bed we wanted to investigate from our previous illumination mission. As soon as we walked down the steep slope through the trees to the bottom of the stream bed two significant things happened: a series of three shots rang out in the distance

and echoed across the valley; at exactly the same time we saw the bottom of the stream bed was wide, well-traveled, had almost perfect natural overhead cover from the trees, and a neat line of phosphorescent blue racing stripes had been spray painted along the path paralleling the stream underneath the trees leading from inside Macedonia deep into Kosovo.

I began taking digital photos and GPS marking as well as stringing some thread across the trail with the intention of returning soon to see if the thread had been broken and in which direction. Our elation of this awesome discovery was soon shattered as automatic gunfire erupted over our heads, and as we took cover we received a very panicked radio call that the other half of our patrol moving up the mountain was pinned down by hostile gunfire. We told them to stay put, take cover, and we would bound around to their assistance. We ran up the stream bed scrambling in the mud and shallow water for about three hundred meters, and then began a long dash up the mountain about 400 meters taking cover where we could. We could hear our counterparts still receiving fire. Seeing a thick grove of trees we naturally sprinted for it and – just inside the cover of the trees found ourselves surrounded by extremely well camouflaged and built up fighting positions complete with a well for water and multiple concentric rings of defense and interlocking fires. I estimated it was a company sized position that had very recently been abandoned as there were still a few items of equipment scattered in the haste of the KLA withdrawal. Panting, sweating, shivering and dehydrated we finished our bound to support our comrades. No sooner had I taken cover next to the SF medic behind a six inch wrinkle in the earth, than I saw tracer rounds flash about an inch past my left elbow at the same time my medic unloaded a magazine back into the direction of fire. I picked up a sustained rate of fire as he reloaded and we made a quick plan. It took us another thirty minutes to extract ourselves out of harms way. Our exfil vehicle never came forward because of the firing and we had to walk all

the way back to Krivenik. The entire patrol was shivering uncontrollably and a couple almost went down from exhaustion and hypothermia.

Unbeknownst to us a British Puma reconnaissance helicopter had crashed a few kilometers from our small drama, and the entire Task Force was freaking out (*Kosovo Helicopter Crash*, 2001). A senior officer from Camp Bondsteel arrived on scene and I gave him a quick SITREP, then we all piled into the Polish vehicles and took our tired bones back to base.

Putting it together later, we believed a KLA spotter had fired warning shots when we entered the sanctity of the covered cross-border movement corridor. The warning shots were not for us but a signal to other KLA elements that something important had been compromised. The nervous Macedonian position nearest our location heard the shots, saw the half of our patrol moving up the mountain to make our exfil linkup and assumed they had fired the shots – clearly the information we gave on our previous linkup with the Macedonians had not been communicated to this position. Like the ironic saying goes, “Friendly fire isn’t”. We also learned several important lessons and not for the first time - assume nothing; rehearse all battle drills and contingencies with combined, joint, and multilateral forces before getting shot at; and bring an interpreter who is in decent shape and actually speaks the correct language. Hmmm. Trust me that never happened again.

The sad ending of this very true story is as follows. Following these events, the Coalition commander would not allow any Coalition operations on the border for two weeks (thus allowing the KLA to regroup, relocate, etc.) and we could not exploit our knowledge. They did move a large British contingent into the area temporarily and we were able to get the most awesome illumination missions on our behalf thundering across the black Kosovo night skies. Our premise was if we couldn’t physically conduct COIN for awhile, we could make the KLA

think we were watching by lighting up the sky for hours at a time at key locations and times. The Brits enthusiastically helped us and even sent a Scorpion tracked reconnaissance vehicle to a hill over-watching the racing stripe painted stream-bed and valley from high ground. We drove an up-armored Humvee out during daylight hours to ensure proper positioning of the Brit recce vehicle. We found several more racing stripes and intersections where the stream emptied out, went over a hill, and into other ravines etc. We had discovered not only KLA caches, rest areas, a mortar pit and fighting positions in the mined area, but also significant supply lines. Our insistent reporting seemed to fall on deaf ears at the top, and we were frustrated by our inability to take advantage of our knowledge and the terrain. As we left the Brit overwatch and scouted around a bit, I halted my driver for what I swore was a three pronged trigger of a mine sticking up on the dirt road in front of our vehicle. Cautiously I got out and investigated. It turned out to be nothing – but something about that spot bothered me and I told the driver to very carefully drive past that area and get the hell out of the area.

The very next day a British Scimitar was catastrophically destroyed in the exact same location by a double stacked AT mine (*Peacekeepers killed in Kosovo*, 2001) (Holley, 2001). The Brits pulled out of sector. Operations were further curtailed by the TF Cdr. No further military ops were allowed by us in that area. The enemy won.

Major lessoned learned – each sector in a conflict is unique. While Peacekeeping Operations may be the primary mission, the Enemy has a vote. The unit in contact is in contact – you can't wish it away or ignore that fact. Force Protection is allowing your subordinate units to take action appropriate to the situation they find themselves in. The false sense of security provided by withdrawing our presence encourages activity of an enemy who knows how to push our political and media driven hot-buttons. A couple catastrophic events will cause the US

Military to withdraw. We must have the will to maintain close personal contact with the enemy – to know and understand the enemy on his own terrain and terms in order to outmaneuver him. The ultimate goal is not necessarily to emphatically defeat our enemies, but to show a resolve more tenacious than theirs and deny them the ability to operate freely in their established safe havens. To degrade the enemy logistics, basing, morale, and rest areas can be every bit as effective as a soundly defeating them.

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Figures

Figure 1. KFOR Sectors 2002



Figure 2. POLUKRBAT Soldiers provide immediate care to wounded civilian (2001)



Figure 3. POLUKRBAT Soldiers tend to wounded Krivenik civilian (2001)



Figure 4. POLUKRBAT Sectors 2001

