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Mentoring on the Edge or, “What you Don’t Learn in a Classroom”

by Colonel John Bessler

The ‘Afghan experience’ for those who serve overseas can be vastly different from the one about which the American public sees, hears, and reads. The same can be said for those who do the writing and reporting. It is comparatively simple to travel to Afghanistan, observe and interview selflessly-serving patriots at work, and write a blog or an article about the challenges ISAF and the coalition faces; it is quite another to be intimately involved in a mission extending over many months. It’s easy to watch; it’s tough to “do.”

This article attempts to bridge that gap. As one of the many who have mentored, assisted, trained, and fought with the Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF), I hope to provide some perspective to the stories in the paper or blogosphere. From mid-2008 through 2009, I commanded all the ANSF mentors and trainers in the Western Provinces of Afghanistan, in an area about the size of Mississippi, and served as the senior US officer west of Kabul and north of Kandahar.

In my role of commanding the mentors and trainers embedded in all three Afghan security organizations (Army, Police, and Border Police), we contended with competing priorities, the tyranny of distance in counterinsurgency (COIN) environment, answering to a NATO higher headquarters, and responsible for four vast, remote and primitive Afghan provinces, in an economy of force mission. We experienced firsthand the day-to-day frustration and the almost crushing inertia, friction, and fog of war that comes with working in a coalition; as a result, I feel uniquely branded by my experiences. Hence the article’s title, “Mentoring at the Edge of Civilization – What You Can’t Learn in the Classroom.”

This story mostly takes place in Badghis Province. Badghis is the one province in Afghanistan in which no part of the Ring Road is paved. Just east of Herat City, the all-weather road turns to gravel, then dirt, then into a potholed path. It improves slightly over the 8200’ Sabzak Pass (courtesy of the Spanish), then returns to a bone-jarring, winding dirt path through several villages enroute to Qala-E-Naw, and all the way into Ghormach District/ Farayab Province in Regional Command-North. It doesn’t return to all-weather road until about Meymanah, where a Chinese company is currently laboring to finish the job.

In the northwest corner of Badghis Province is the border town of Mangan. It is in the midst of a sea of rolling hills and as remotely situated as any place in Afghanistan. It is a mud-walled, mud-roofed, dusty, windblown landscape, connected to the provincial capital of Qala-E-Naw by

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a dirt road through Sang-a-tesh, about an eight-hour drive to the south, and from the district center of Bala Morghab, on the Morghab River to the north, another 6 hours of goat-trail/ motocross-driving in good weather. From November thru March, it is virtually cut off from motor traffic due to the morass of knee-deep mud into which the snow and rain of Badghis transform the road. It is truly one of the most remote towns in the province.

Mangan sits about 20 kilometers west of the Turkmenistan border and is home to an outpost of Afghan Border Police, about 20 strong at any given time. Their role is ostensibly to prevent smuggling (of opium, precursor chemicals for drug or IED production, weapons, even humans) into or out of the region, as well as to control and monitor whatever commerce moves across the border.



Pic 1: The author 'shana ba shana' (shoulder to shoulder) with an Afghan National Police recruit in Khaki Safi d District, Farah Province, June 2009. COL Bessler and the ANSF of the Western Provinces worked to increase police recruiting, improve police training, and sought to improve district and provincial governance throughout the West.

A key member of the Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF), the Border Police are clad in sand-colored chocolate-chip uniforms reminiscent of the US Army's desert uniforms of the Gulf War era. They are fairly conspicuous in their duties at airports (customs, tariffs, and immigration), border crossing stations, and in patrolling and 'controlling' the 50km strip along Afghanistan's. In 2009 the Border Police strength totaled about 8200 in uniform; the Western Zone's apportionment was around 1100, or 'one per kilometer of border,' as BG Malham, Regional Command-West's Border Police Commander, used to proudly (and revealingly) declare. The Border Police fall under the Ministry of Interior and receive their training from Kabul. The fortunate ones have also received some specialized training in customs, inspections, riot control, and other training from the Italian Customs Police (Guardia de Finanzia.) However, those receiving any specialized training number only in the low hundreds; less than a quarter of the Border Police have received any formal training whatsoever.

Badghis Province is one of four provinces in ISAF's Regional Command-West (RC-W), together with Herat, (arguably the country's unofficial financial capitol,) Ghowr (one of the poorest provinces), and Farah, which borders both Iran and RC-South and consequently has security challenges reminiscent of Helmand. Together these four provinces, and the ISAF mission within

them, comprise one of ISAF's - and the government of Afghanistan's -- 'economy of force' missions (the other is RC-North.)

An 'economy of force' is defined in **Army Field Manual 3-0** as —allocating minimum essential combat power to secondary efforts; economy of force is the reciprocal of mass. It requires accepting prudent risk in selected areas to achieve superiority — overwhelming effects — in the decisive operation.” To translate: if you are not the decisive effort, you are an economy of force. And to someone conducting an economy of force mission, life can become very interesting (euphemism for “extremely frustrating”) when you really need help in a hurry. In Afghanistan, it is obvious that RC-South is the main effort in ISAF's operational plan, while the comparatively quiet North and West have been relegated to economies of force: areas where the government and ISAF are accepting 'prudent risk.'

What this tangibly translates into is, for those executing an economy of force mission is that these regions and the organizations are lower in priority for just about everything needed to move the Afghans and the ISAF mission forward: mentors, trainers, logistics, communications upgrades, new initiatives and programs, new facilities for both ANSF and mentors. That's in the steady-state world of day-to-day mentoring and stability sector reform. But when the shooting starts and the crap really starts to hit the fan, it often takes a lot more squawking to higher headquarters to get the high-demand, high-impact help needed (e.g., UAVs and other intelligence platforms, close air support, and attack helicopters.) As these enablers are generally stationed so they can best respond to the main efforts, it generally takes a lot longer (more energy, justification, squawking) to get them when they are needed – these platforms are few in number and ISAF/ IJC must judiciously weigh risk when considering moving them. And 'crying wolf' is



Pic 2: COL John Bessler poses with Bala Morghab District Police Chief Lewall and his NDS chief at the close of operations in the Morghab Castle, during combat operations to enhance security in that district, May 2009

not an option – woe to the tactical commander really didn't need these enablers and called for them. I walked a balancing act on many occasions as to when and if to call for assistance.

Additionally, the economy of force mission translated into the training, mentoring, and operating budget of the Coalition Forces working in RC West. Our mentor teams were routinely undermanned and under-resourced. As an example, my Border Police Mentor team was authorized 56 personnel, but was normally manned at 12. This is one of the reasons 4th Bde, 82nd was sent to RC-West

just before last autumn's elections, to increase the coalition presence and begin large-scale partnering that was impossible up until that point. Concomitant with the mentor manning disparity at the time were the training and resourcing plans for Region West's ANSF across the board.

These constraints and challenges notwithstanding, just working with the Italian headquarters in RC-W required a great deal of collaboration, consumed much of my energies, and I often reverted to subtle coercion; in the words of GEN George C. Marshall, having to 'learn the skills of persuasion and guile' in dealing with my immediate higher headquarters.

RC-W is led by an Italian one-star; the command group a mix of European staff officers primarily from Italy and Spain. The Italians rotate every six months, yet are responsible for all operations across their zone, which comprises nearly 25% of Afghanistan. Because of this 6-month cycle, I went thru three Italian Generals and their staffs during my tenure; I often opined (privately) that I spent as much time mentoring the Italians as I did my Afghan brothers, but at least the Afghans didn't rotate out every few months! To be fair, running RC-W was a massive undertaking, as it was a huge area of responsibility (64,000 square miles), and few of the military in Kabul really grasped how massively distances and terrain impeded operations in the West. You really had to live there and experience it to believe it.

One of the many frustrations of working in a coalition is the caveats of the member states. Coalition members contribute in various ways to the overall mission, but all operate within certain parameters and limits, which are dictated by their higher headquarters, ultimately by their voting constituents, Ministries, or Parliament, America included. This is not to say the European allies aren't staunch contributors to the Afghan mission; several nations have a larger proportion of their Armed Forces deployed to Afghanistan and (other places) than we do. This merely points out that many countries are in Afghanistan (and other places as willing partners) under certain national constraints – they operate 'with strings attached', in other words – whether to appease their voting constituencies or Parliaments, or to address other agendas within their own government.

As you can imagine, caveats can be a source of supreme frustration. For example, Spanish forces in the West required a call to Madrid in order for some of their units to drive more than ten kilometers from their home forward operating base (FOB). Certain of their vehicles could only operate eight hours a day before needing a full down-day for maintenance (so continuous, multi-day operations were out of the question.) Spanish helicopters were forbidden to be away from their home airstrip more than 12 hours, and could not laager at night – no exceptions - anywhere other than on their home strip, and I had to sign an insurance waiver before boarding. Both Italian and Spanish birds required 'coalition forces' (read: US, Spanish, or Italian – not Afghan) secure any landing zone before a helicopter landing – even for a MEDEVAC - anywhere in the West.

I've hopefully painted a not-too-lengthy picture of the state of affairs in RC-W in the late autumn 2008 – much of it probably doesn't look much different today. Rotation schedules (Italians @ six months, US @ 12 months, the Spanish PRT in Badghis blazed their way through a rotation schedule of a mere 120 days!); caveats, work ethics, cultural norms, and differing perceptions of

mission, vision, and endstate were, and remain, at odds, but somehow the RC commander and leaders at all levels struggled then, and continue to struggle now, to find some commonality – our current Stability Operations doctrine (FM 3-07) describes this as ‘unity of purpose’-- and that is exactly what must occur for the coalition to move the ball down the field.

So --how do you like Coalition Warfare now?

Back to our Border Post at Mangan: In many ways, this station could serve as a ‘poster child’ for many ANSF installations/ outposts around the country – remote, terribly austere and under-resourced, untrained and illiterate patrolmen of transient and questionable loyalty to the central government. I often wondered what held some of these posts together: the charisma of the local, district, provincial, or regional commander. Tribal/ village pride? A quasi-steady paycheck? Or was it a glimmer of altruism or nascent nationalism?

It was always incredibly challenging for the ABP headquarters in Herat to resupply Mangan post. The awful road, and in the wintertime the poor weather in Badghis combined to make it literally impossible to bring food, generator and vehicle fuel, water, ammunition, pay, or medicines in, or even to rotate patrolmen in and out for leave or for appointments at home, the headquarters, or to Kabul. Things simply ground to a halt in the autumn, winter, and early spring. The only reliable communications was by cell phone and vehicle radio, which they would only use when they turned the vehicle on.

The ANSF leadership was keenly aware of the tenuous nature of the Mangan Station, and without much nudging from either the mentors or the Provincial Governor, would try to work with BG Malham to ensure a regular resupply schedule was followed. This was always more challenging when the weather closed in during the winter; during the sporadic clear days, the ANSF might fly their helicopters for resupply or the odd convoy of ABP and ANA trucks might be organized for the two-day journey up and back from Qala-E-Naw. Only when the ANSF were totally committed elsewhere, or when the leadership didn’t feel particularly helpful towards the Border Police General, or when the situation devolved into an emergency situation did BG Malham go above his mentor team and demand coalition assistance.

One such incident provides some insights into the difficulties which face the coalition, the counterinsurgency fight, the mentors, and the development community in Afghanistan. Over the course of about two weeks in February 2009, a resupply request for the Mangan Station by BG Malham had gone ignored, passed over, or tap-danced around by the ANSF. BG Malham grew increasingly frustrated by the lack of attention and apparent unwillingness by the ANSF to support him. Things heated up when corroborated reports started flowing in that the villagers in Mangan were resupplying the station from their homes. When reports of Border Policemen begging for scraps of moldy bread began to flow, I took things to the Italian Regional commander. He in turn flatly refused to support any resupply mission to Mangan, citing weather, operational commitments, and the Mangan Station’s questionable loyalty to legitimate authority as reasons why he would not support any mission with coalition aircraft or vehicles.

A similar crisis had ensued six weeks previously which colored the RC commander’s notions in this regard, which not only highlights the difficulties of mentoring the ANSF, but the Afghan

notion of security, loyalties, and job performance. After wrangling with ANSF and the RC headquarters for days previously in an attempt to resupply Mangan Station with ammunition (food apparently not an issue at that point), the RC commander had reluctantly allowed an Italian aircraft to resupply small arms ammunition for the Border Station. The Mangan Station Chief promptly turned the ammunition over the local Mangan power brokers (labeled ‘Taliban’ by BG Malham, but unverified), under an agreement that they could have it so long as they didn’t use it against the Station, or in the area.’ So while things remained fairly quiet at Mangan Station, we couldn’t help but wonder where the ammunition had gone, and which Coalition forces were being fired at with it; meanwhile the Station Chief, in his mind, had operated within his higher commander’s intent and did a perfectly reasonable thing to keep the peace in his area of responsibility – and things did remain fairly calm in and around Mangan as a result.



Pic 3: Meeting with ANSF officials and Governor Arman from Badghis Province, Afghanistan, to coordinate final matters regarding a coalition offensive set to kick off in that region.

With being ‘once burnt, twice shy,’ the loyalties and reliability of the Border Station chief in question, the RC commander was even more reticent to support the current request. In every case of seeking help from the Coalition, the mentors’ first course of action is, and remains, ‘help the Afghans help themselves.’ Very often throughout my tour, the ANSF had the ability, means, and capability to execute many missions, but their first option was to ask for help – why spend their energy, their fuel, their trucks, and maybe their lives on the line if they could get the Coalition to do it for them? In partnering with the ANSF, we spent countless hours convincing the Afghans that they were capable and could (and often did!) execute some fairly complex operations. As for this current crisis, however, I vividly recall when it came to a head: at a tense meeting in the Afghan National Army Corps Commander’s office after about a week of bad weather, just after the reports of moldy-bread-begging had surfaced. We were together with the RC commander, BG Malham, my Border Police mentor team leader, and the ANSF leadership and BG Malham as option after option was discarded as unreasonable, impossible, or too slow to enact; finally as Coalition mentors and the ANSF found themselves foundering for a solution, BG Malham leapt to his feet, shouting, ‘You must do something, my men are starving! The post will fall!’

This outburst likely galvanized the ANSF into action, for at the next opportunity of clear weather, miraculously an ANA MI-17 – I love those birds - loaded with all required classes of supply, a paymaster, and some replacement Border Police took off from the Corps HQ at Camp

Zafar, flew to Mangan, dropped off supplies and personnel, and retrieved a few sick or otherwise out-rotating police. Immediate crisis averted.

Fast forward three days. My interpreter, the Border Mentor Team Chief's interpreter, my Operations Center, and the RC HQs CP received nearly simultaneously cell phone calls that Mangan Station was 'in a TIC' (troops in contact), and under attack. As reports were normally filtered through one, and sometimes two, ANSF leaders, mentors, the Italians, and our interpreters, details were always sketchy, and the questions flew: How bad is it? Is it overrun? Did the deal brokered with the local TB fall thru? Any WIA? How many? Heavy weapons involved? How many enemy? You get the picture.

The RC commander, ANA commander, and I converged in the ANA commander's office to share what we knew and develop the situation. The "fog of war" in instances like this – and scenarios like this occurred at least every week somewhere in RC-W – is exacerbated by distance, weather, roads, tenuous communications, reports of dubious credibility, and language; the friction can become palpable.

In the end, we opted to wait before spinning up any sort of 'help,' in spite of BG Malham's angry and impassioned plea for assistance: —"You must bomb them!" No observers from the Coalition were on the ground to get ground truth; this action had brewed up in mid-afternoon, and, (despite the frantic, impassioned, and panicky calls from the Border Station and BG Malham's strident insisting that we 'do something!'), this was unlikely anything very serious: attacks in RC-W generally occurred either at night under a moon or at first light, and Mangan had not had a serious TIC in nearly a year (probably in partial thanks to our Station Chief!) As time went on, we chose to let things develop in an attempt to gain some clarity, which turned out to be the right call. **COIN principle #1** applied to the mentor mission: sometimes the best thing to do is to do nothing.

We finally knitted together what happened up at Mangan that day. It turns out that the TIC wasn't a TIC at all, but angry retributive fire by a shepherd and his two friends who 'attacked' (fired at) the Mangan Station after two Border Troops had stolen one of his sheep to supplement their newly-delivered supplies. No Taliban attack. No overrunning-the-outpost. But far more importantly, what did this incident do for the state of affairs in and around Mangan? No legitimate, disciplined government presence. No respect for, or protection of, personal property. No trust in the uniformed representatives of Kabul (who are supported by the Coalition.) What did this codify in the minds of the locals (the real 'battlefield' of COIN)?

So this leaves me with a few thoughts, and a few questions:

Is giving ammunition to the local power broker a good alternative to suffering a humiliating and costly attack on the border station?

One man's Taliban might be another man's security.

Napoleon once said it was far better and easier to fight a coalition than to be in one. I often said it was like taking the Cub Scouts from five different nations to war. Exactly

how does one move the ball down the field in a coalition such as the one we have in ISAF, with troop rotations, cultural norms, work ethics, national caveats at odds with our own?

Unity of purpose is a concept that briefs well but is incredibly difficult to achieve. It will be an exhausting, necessary, and vitally-important undertaking for you.

Before you jump to conclusions about why your coalition partner, peer, civilian counterpart, or higher headquarters is thwarting you, pause and try to see the problem from their perspective – they are wearing lenses of culture, caveat, motivation, or constraints of which you have little knowledge. Try to see the issue from their point of view. Once you understand their agenda or point of view, you can normally identify ways of nudging them towards an end state which meets both your needs and theirs.

Patience is a virtue for which you will need a limitless supply.

FM 3-07 Chapter 2 describes the five stability sectors of Stability Operations. One detail not in that diagram is the very real requirement that these sectors, and the agencies who are working very hard to achieve progress in them, must all work together to integrate them. Braiding the rope of the five strands – keeping each other informed as initiatives progress or stumble – is an imperative.

If the North and West are comparatively quiet, might we consider a change in operational strategy? Why use our main effort against the enemy's main effort? Use the indirect approach ala Sir Basil Liddell Hart: shifting our main effort to those areas, gain the easy win in the less-troubled North and West, then work our way towards victory with 60% of the country stable and recovering?

And an oldie but a goodie, another one from Napoleon: the first report is (virtually always, guaranteed) going to be wrong.

–At the end of the movie,” as our European partners in Afghanistan like to say, my final observation is that working in a coalition at the tactical/ operational level is truly all about patience and communication, seeing another's perspective, and particularly about sharpening one's skills of persuasion, critical thinking, and guile. We can't win without the coalition, but given the nature of a coalition fight in such a complex stability operation in Afghanistan, winning certainly takes a lot more creativity and patience than we would like, or that we're used to.

COL John Bessler became the Deputy Director of the U.S. Army Peacekeeping & Stability Operations Institute (PKSOI) in May 2010. Prior to that he served as the Division Chief, Security, Reconstruction, and Transitions for PKSOI in August 2009 after 14 months in Herat, Afghanistan, where he commanded the Afghan Regional Security Integration Command, Western Provinces (ARSIC-West). In that position, he worked and fought side-by-side with Afghan and NATO forces while training Afghan Army and Afghan Police forces during 2008 and 2009. He worked intimately and regularly with NATO forces both in a mentoring as well as in a combat

capacity, and even more routinely with United States Agency for International Development (USAID) and Department of State representatives, four Provincial Reconstruction Teams from as many countries, as well as routine contacts with DIA, CIA, the Joint Interagency Task Force (Counter Narcotics), and Special Operations Forces (USA and USMC.)

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