

Running Head: Establishing a Special

Establishing a Special Forces Firebase

MSG Dennis B. Berry

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18Z5V, Team Sergeant, ODA 381, 3d BN, 3d Special Forces Group (Airborne)

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Abstract

The U.S. Army Special Forces has used firebases to project a forward presence since the beginning of the Vietnam War. It has proven one of the best ways to get a small element of Special Forces into an area and begin to establish an American presence to assist in foreign policy agreed upon by the U.S. and host nation. Using firebases, Special Forces are able to recruit and train indigenous personnel and build rapport with the local population. Small elements like Special Forces are able to operate with little direct guidance and support themselves with a minimal amount of higher levels of support. The U.S. Army can meet its objective in a large area without risking a large amount of Soldiers.

Establishing a Special Forces Firebase

In February 2004, my Special Forces Operational Detachment-Alpha (SFODA) received notification that it would deploy for the third time to Afghanistan in support of Operation Enduring Freedom (OEF). We had just returned from a deployment to the same area just one month prior to the warning order. My detachment had little time to prepare for the deployment as our mission would be different from the previous deployment. Our command told us that we would be establishing a new firebase in an area that was very hostile to coalition forces. My detachment began immediately conducting research on the area of operations (AO) that we would be working in. We also found out that we would be assisted by another detachment from a different company. The addition of the extra SFODA was good news for my detachment. We were preparing to move into an AO that covered more than 200 square kilometers. With only one detachment, it would have made conducting missions very difficult, if not impossible. With only one detachment, we would have had to decide whether to spend our time building the firebase or establishing a foothold in the AO and building from that. Having two detachments meant that we would be able to do both.

In addition to the Battle Focus Analysis (BFA) that we were conducting in preparation for the deployment, we were also allowed to attend the Mid South Shooting School near Memphis, TN. We spent an entire week at the training center allowing the newer member of the detachment to concentrate on shooting techniques while being assisted by world-class instructors. We were able to focus entirely on improving our shooting skills without any outside distractions that we normally would encounter while training at Ft. Bragg. At the end of this week, each of the team had increased his shooting skills by almost 100 percent. At the end of the training, we returned to Ft. Bragg and began our predeployment activities.

One of the many advantages of the SFODA is its ability to be self-sustaining. The SFODA can conduct many of the support functions that most Army elements rely on higher HQs support elements for assistance. NCOs on the detachment had the capability to drive forklifts to load equipment, most medical needs are conducted at the SFODA level through the team medic, the SFODA engineer conducts supply issues and all communication needs are taken care of by the SFODA communications NCOs. We were also able to develop our own intelligence briefs with the Intelligence NCO and the Assistant Detachment Commander (WO2). This was one of the most important of the predeployment tasks as it enabled us to gain important information on previous activities in our AO. We also were able to find out key personalities, demographics, languages spoken, and location of key villages in the AO.

We deployed to Afghanistan in mid June 2004 landing in Kandahar to temperatures in the low 100-degree mark. The detachment arrived with eight members, seven of them NCOs. Our sister team had arrived several days before us and had already moved to the firebase to conduct a Relief in Place (RIP) as well as a Transfer of Authority (TOA) with the detachment that had been given the task to establish the firebase. My detachment conducted our pre-launch activities in Kandahar as part of a unit requirement prior to any detachment moving to its firebase. This consisted of a country in brief, equipment test, communication checks, weapon test fire and several other pre-checks. After 4 days in Kandahar, we were finally ready to move to our firebase. One day prior to our departure, the detachment that we were replacing began to arrive in Kandahar for their redeployment back to the U.S. We were able to get several briefings from the leadership from that detachment as well as the communication NCO and the Operations SGT (Tm SGT). Each of the briefings that we received proved invaluable in the next few months as we gained a foothold on the AO.

During our time at Kandahar we were also able to conduct a linkup with the head of the contract agency that provided Class 1 interpreters to Special Operation Forces (SOF) throughout the southern region of Afghanistan. We were able to hire two interpreters, one with previous experience with SOF and in the AO that we were going into. We coordinated with the local Afghan National Army (ANA) Leader to provide us with an element to escort us to our firebase. We prepared our gear and vehicles to depart Kandahar the next morning.

We departed Kandahar early in the morning the following day to prevent moving our convoy in the extreme heat of the day. We had also hired two large trucks known as jingle trucks for the large amount of accoutrements on the front bumpers and the sound they make as they travel down the road. We had left Kandahar later than we had planned due to miscommunications between the truck drivers and the unit S-4 that had coordinated for us to hire them. After finally getting on the road almost two hours late, we were making good time along the newly paved road between Kandahar and Qalat. Almost two hours into the trip, one of the trucks suffered a blown transmission. The bad part of it was that we were now stranded as a large majority of our gear was on that truck and we had no way to cross load it to the other truck or to the vehicles we were driving. Our vehicles were loaded to their capacity. We radioed to our command and let them know the situation and that the truck driver had assured us that he could fix the transmission. Needless to say I was quite skeptical. With only a few small tools and some bolts and nuts removed from other parts of the truck, the driver, true to his word, had repaired the truck and we were back on our way. The remainder of the trip was for the most part uneventful except for the rough terrain we had to cross once we left the highway. We had covered 120 kilometers in less than three hours on the highway. It took that same amount of time to cross

only 30 kilometers over the rock, dirt and sand that the Afghans call a road. Although the firebase was in the beginning stages of construction, it was a welcome sight after the trip.

Upon arriving at the firebase each of the different MOSs conducted a linkup with his counterpart from our sister detachment to get a current brief and become aware of ongoing activities in the camp. After allowing a period of time for my detachment to download our equipment from the “jingle truck”, the detachment moved to the makeshift operations center to conduct an updated intelligence and operational brief from the leadership of our sister team. We found out that very little had been done in the area concerning direct action operations or establishing rapport with the local population.

I had each of the NCOs begin to establish themselves in the firebase. The weapons NCO (18B) began by coordinating with the base security. He went to each of the towers in the firebase to assess the current situation, introduce himself to the soldiers at those locations and begin his development of an upgrade to security measures.

The Engineer NCO (18C) also looked at base defense but rather than the weapons or direct fire systems, he looked at the physical structure of the base. He checked not only the walls and towers of the base but the near and far security measures. The base was relatively new so little had been done to bolster base security. When we arrived, there were only a few wooden building and HESCO barrier walls surrounding the base. The 18C began to put together a list of materials that he would need to upgrade the security of the base and keep the occupants of the base safe in the event of a ground attack.

The medical NCOs (18D) consisted of two individuals. The junior in rank of the two already had two combat deployments with the detachment under his belt while the senior was on his first deployment with the team. Both unloaded their medical gear and began to set up in the makeshift

aid station along with the 18D from our sister team. My 18Ds were told that there was little in the way of medical care in the valley that we had moved in to. The locals were very wary of Americans and had, up to that point, stayed away from the firebase even after offer to care for sick and injured by our sister team. The 18Ds began to formulate plans to get the locals to come to the firebase for medical attention. The medical NCOs in Special Forces (SF) are normally the number one way to begin to build rapport with local populations and we had already agreed that if the locals were going to build any trust in us, medical care would be the one thing that brought them to us.

My two communications NCOs (18E) were like the 18Ds in that the junior had two previous tours with SF and the senior was on his first trip with us. They began setting up the radios so that we could communicate with out battalion HQs. This consisted of several different types so that if one system went down we would have a backup. They also set up the computer systems that we would use to both communicate with the battalion and produce daily reports to include situation (SITREP), intelligence (INTSUM), status of personnel (PERSTAT) and logistics (LOGSTAT).

I went with the Team Leader to get an inbrief from the leadership from our sister team. We were able to get a quick brief on the current situation and what operations had been conducted prior to our arrival. We found out that little had been done in our AO on a regular basis. The latest mission in the AO by SOF forces had resulted in an ambush by the Taliban on a Navy SF patrol, the detachment that we were replacing had gone to reinforce them and suffered an Improvised Explosive Device (IED) that had killed the interpreter in the vehicle and three others had suffered severe injuries. Throughout the AO IEDs were commonplace and very little intelligence could be gathered from the locals because they were in great fear of reprisals from the Taliban if they gave and coalition unit any type of support. We found out that night letters on

the doors of village elders were also common to maintain fear in the region. We had our work cut out for us.

I met the second day with the Platoon Leader from the small contingent of Combat Engineers that was given the task to build the firebase. They had less than a squad and a large amount of building to do before the winter arrived. Along with the Team Sergeant from the other team, we gathered the 18Cs together and began to formulate a plan to build the firebase up in a short time and still be able to conduct missions in the surrounding area. We concluded that we would have to get local workers to help with the building. We began with the locals from the surrounding villages. Because of their fear of the Taliban, they refused regardless the pay we offered. We opted to get local workers from Kandahar. The 18C from our sister team had helped to build a firebase in Kandahar during the previous deployment and still had his contacts in Kandahar. We developed a plan to have several of our combined teams return to Kandahar and hire a crew of workers to help us with the construction of the firebase.

We also began a program where we would take our medical NCOs into the local villages and treat them there. It prevented them from having to come to the firebase and enabled us to show the villagers our medical capabilities. Within the first few visits, this proved to be a success. Along with the medical assistance, we were able to talk with the village elders and let them know that we were there to help and that we were staying for a long time. We asked what they needed for assistance and started the formation of friendships.

The element in search of builders departed for Kandahar with a small element from the ANA for security. They were very successful in their search. They were able to get more than 200 workers, mostly from and extended family. They also purchased building materials for the firebase as well as tents and food supplies for the workforce.

Within the next few months, the NCOs of both detachments showed skills, maturity and ingenuity far beyond their ranks or ages. Both detachments acted as one and worked together as though they had been on the same team for years.

Before we finished our seven-month tour, we had built the firebase into a hardened structure with state of the art communication capable of connecting to the internet, SIPRnet, satellite phone system and LAN throughout the entire base camp. We raised the security level to be able to withstand intense ground attack and repel an air attack up to 122mm rockets. We had a mortar crew from the 25th ID with an indirect fire capability using 81mm mortars. We had conducted more than 125 direct action raids on Taliban forces. We had supported the first ever elections in Afghanistan preventing disruption by anti-coalition forces. We built a school and medical facility for use by the local villagers. More than 150 children attend the school and the medical facility sees an average of 300 patients per week.

Background. I entered the U.S. army in 1986 at Ft. Benning, GA. I completed Infantry training and Airborne school and was assigned to the 82nd Airborne Division. At the time, the Division was over strength and I was assigned as a records clerk for the Adjutant General Company. I spent 18 months at the Replacement Detachment inprocessing new Soldiers into the Division. I re-enlisted in early 1988 and was assigned to one of the infantry battalions. During my inprocessing into the unit the CSM assigned me to the Personnel Action Center (PAC) because of my experience with records at the AG company. I requested to go to an infantry platoon but the CSM told me that he needed me in the PAC and that when the next records specialist was assigned to the unit he would assign me to an infantry platoon. After six months in the PAC, I finally was assigned to the Scout platoon as a Radio/Telephone Operator (RTO). Within six more months, I was moved up to assistant squad leader. At that time, my Platoon Sergeant sent me to Ranger school. While I fought going initially, it turned out later to be the best thing that happened to my career. While in the Scout Platoon, I went on several deployments and went with the platoon to Desert Shield/Desert Storm. When I returned from Desert Storm, I was assigned as a Pre-Ranger instructor for the Division. I made the decision there to attend the Special Forces Qualification Course (SFQC).

I went to Special Forces Assessment and Selection (SFAS) in November 1992 and was selected to attend the SFQC. I graduated the SFQC in December of 1994, was assigned to the 3rd Special Forces Group (Airborne) (SFG(A)). Four days after signing in, I deployed to Haiti in support of Operation Uphold Democracy. I spent the next four years with two different SF Teams deploying to more than 10 different countries and 15 states. I was assigned to the United States Army Special Forces Command (Airborne) from March 1999 to September 2001 as an Operations NCO for the EUCOM theater. I returned to the 3rd SFG(A) two days after 9/11 and

spent the next four years deploying four different times in support of both Operation Enduring Freedom (OIF) in Afghanistan and Operation Iraqi Freedom (OIF) in Iraq. I left 3rd SFG(A) once again in January 2005 to work as an instructor for the U.S. Army John F. Kennedy Special Warfare Center and School (USAJFKSWCS). I was later assigned as the First Sergeant for the Special Forces Initial Entry Program Company. From there I was selected USASMA.

My schools include:

U.S. Army Ranger School

Jumpmaster School

Special Forces Qualification Course (Weapons and Tactics)

Infantry Mortar Leaders Course

I have the following awards:

BSM/V 2OLC

MSM 4OLC

JSCOM

ARCOM 3OLC

JSAM

AAM SLC

CIB 2nd AWD

Master Parachute Badge

EIB

Pathfinder Badge

Special Forces Tab

Ranger Tab