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Afghanistan BDOC Rotation Preparation

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Operation ENDURING FREEDOM 01/07/2004-06/15/2004

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22 August 2006

Class 57

Abstract

This paper details the difficulties encountered in organizing, integrating, training, and equipping a unit composed of Special Forces and support personnel. The widely divergent levels of experience, training, and motivation between these two groups of soldiers causes professional, administrative, and logistical difficulties which unit leaders must plan for and overcome. This paper explores the methods and techniques used to overcome these inherent difficulties during the train-up phase for a combat deployment to Afghanistan.

Appendix 1-Acronyms

Afghanistan BDOC Rotation Preparation

I am a 21-year veteran of the U.S. Army, with the last 14 years spent in various Special Forces units. I have deployed into combat twice while serving with the First Special Forces Group (Airborne) headquartered at Fort Lewis, Washington. My first combat rotation was from March to September 2002 in support of OEF-P. I was the Operations Sergeant for ODA-196 during this deployment to Basilan Island, Mindanao, Philippines. This deployment effectively denied the terrorist Abu Sayaf Group the use of Basilan Island and chased them further into the Sulu Archipelago toward Malaysia. My second combat rotation was from February to June 2004 in support of OEF in Afghanistan. I was the Operations Sergeant of ODA-196 and the NCOIC of the BDOC during this deployment. My significant military schooling includes SF ANCOC, SOTIC, SFARTAETC, SOT, ASOT Manager's Course and SF O&I, I have held or currently hold the following MOSs: 11H (TOW), 18B (Weapons Sergeant), 18F (Intelligence Sergeant), and 18Z (Operations Sergeant). My significant postings outside of the First Special Forces Group are a two-year tour of duty with SFD-K (now re-flagged as the 39th Special Forces Detachment) and two years spent as the NCOIC of Joint Operations for JUSMAGTHAI.

This paper details and explores the difficulties encountered in organizing, integrating, training, and equipping a unit composed of special operations forces and support personnel in preparation for a combat rotation to Afghanistan. During the summer of 2003, the leadership of the First Special Forces Group (Airborne) decided to pursue various opportunities to deploy and introduce more First Group members into the CENTCOM Theater of Operations. The intended purpose behind this effort to deploy more First Group soldiers into the CENTCOM AOR was threefold: to gain valuable combat and operational experience for First Group's soldiers, to take advantage of SOR funds to replenish depleted unit funds and to replace outdated and missing

equipment, and to enhance unit morale by contributing a larger role to the GWOT. The Group leadership overcame several difficulties, both major and minor, for this plan to move beyond the formative stages.

At that time, OEF-P in the Philippines occupied only a company plus of troop strength from within the Group and both the Philippine government and Philippine military leadership were comfortable with that current small footprint of USSOF. Larger deployments in the past energized a vocal minority in the Philippines to protest U.S. forces involvement in the Philippines and put unwanted pressure on Gloria Macapagal Arroyo's government. An added complexity in the Philippines was a constitutional mandate declaring that no foreign force could unilaterally operate on Philippine soil. The difficulty for First Group members became operating by, through, and with a largely apathetic and unmotivated Philippine military. The initial rotations to the Philippines were approximately battalion strength, but a paucity of viable targets, a generally indifferent and lethargic Philippine military, and a vocal anti-US Filipino minority led to a drawdown of U.S. forces in the Mindanao region.

Since the beginning of the GWOT in 2001, previously scheduled obligations to JCETs and commitments to other deployments within Asia left few First Group SOF personnel available for CENTCOM rotations. The First Group leadership declined outright or downsized numerous deployments and exercises in an effort to minimize current and future obligations. Turning down exercises and deployments was a deliberate endeavor by the Group leadership to free up troop strength in order to give them the latitude to release troops as they saw fit. Another nagging difficulty was a leadership at PACOM and SOCPAC hesitant to release SOF committed to various OPLANs within the Pacific region. All these different factors seemed to conspire to

relegate First Group to the sidelines of the U.S. Army's two main efforts in the GWOT: OIF in Iraq and OEF in Afghanistan.

Within this atmosphere, the First Group leadership began exploring different options to facilitate the introduction of unit members into the CENTCOM AOR. PACOM and USASFC placed a major constraint on First Group's leadership, which everyone had to be cognizant of and work to overcome. The edict stated that no ODA would deploy as a cohesive, complete unit outside of the PACOM AOR without the express approval and consent of both headquarters (PACOM and USASFC). However, the First Group headquarters could deploy portions or select members of ODAs outside of the PACOM AOR without drawing increased scrutiny from either headquarters and without violating the letter or intent of the original order. First Group leadership made inquiries to both the Iraq and Afghanistan CJSOTFs to see what missions or opportunities were available. CJSOTF-A in Afghanistan had a need for personnel to perform the BDOC mission for the CJSOTF compound located within the confines of Baghram Air Base in Central Afghanistan. Although this wasn't thought of among the First Group staff and among First Group unit members as the ideal tasking or employment that they were seeking, unit members felt that once they were on the ground in Afghanistan they would be able to search out additional missions and responsibilities.

The Third Battalion Commander of First Group, LTC Lee, accepted the mission from Group headquarters and began preparing the first element of soldiers to deploy to Afghanistan. ODA (ODA-186) received the primary mission to organize, equip, and train the first BDOC rotation. The First Group staff and LTC Lee placed two significant restrictions on the deploying ODA. Firstly, the ODA could not deploy more than half of their personnel forward (so that the remainder of the team would be able to function as a split team and could be truthfully reported

to higher headquarters as mission capable). Secondly, the composition of the BDOC force would have to consist of at least 51 percent support personnel or support MOSs drawn from the Group support companies. The reasoning for this was twofold: a desire by the First Group leadership to deploy support soldiers into a combat zone for operational experience; and a belief that once in Afghanistan, the Special Forces soldiers within the BDOC rotation would detach from the BDOC and have the latitude and freedom to perform direct action or other SOF specific missions. The support soldiers would form the nucleus of the BDOC guard force and handle the day-to-day duties and tasks while the SF soldiers were on operations throughout Afghanistan.

Two BDOC rotations trained up and deployed with varying degrees of success during the fall of 2003 and the winter of 2003-4. Various incidents during the first BDOC rotation, both during operations throughout Afghanistan and back at the base at Baghram, caused friction between the BDOC leadership and the CJSOTF leadership and staff. This enmity severely limited the operational opportunities for the SOF personnel attached to the second BDOC rotation. The bad feelings carried over into the first part of the third BDOC rotation, of which I was the NCOIC. LTC Lee, who I had served under at SFD-K, selected my ODA (ODA-196) to organize and train the third BDOC rotation. LTC Lee scheduled my deployment to Afghanistan to begin in February and end in June of 2004. The First Group staff and LTC Lee planned my rotation to be the largest rotation of the three organized up to this point. I placed 12 SF soldiers and 13 support personnel on my initial BDOC roster. I chose five members of my ODA for the BDOC roster and I drew an additional nine SF team members from throughout the battalion. Support company first sergeants and sergeant majors from throughout the Group provided support personnel names to me. This caused immediate problems that would continuously plague the entire BDOC rotation because the majority of the support personnel were not

volunteers for this mission. The preponderance of motivated volunteers from among First Group's support personnel had already deployed on the first two BDOC rotations. This left the support companies' leadership with the unenviable task of filling quotas for the mission with personnel who were largely unenthusiastic about the prospect of deploying into combat. An unfortunate side effect of placing a fixed quota on some companies was that the company leadership seized on this opportunity to get rid of some of their problematic soldiers for an extended period. Although the majority of the support personnel were intelligent, diligent, hard working, and proactive in assessing situations and making decisions, the ODA-196 BDOC rotation inherited some personnel with both serious personal problems and pronounced professional apathy. These personnel generated an incessant stream of headaches for the other BDOC NCOs and I to deal with and we had to drop two support personnel from the BDOC roster and add two new support personnel to the roster before we deployed. This turnover occurred during a one-week timeframe about half way through our train up. This was a nightmare in itself as we scrambled to integrate and equip the new personnel.

The Detachment Commander for ODA-196 was forward deployed throughout the planning and training phases for this rotation, which meant that this rotation would be entirely NCO planned and led all the way up until the deployment forward. After an initial inprocessing to fill out data sheets, disseminate general information and rules, and conduct opening introductions among all the personnel, we began training. The wide disparity in experience among the soldiers of this BDOC rotation made it necessary to ensure a training schedule front-loaded with basic tasks so that everyone would have common ground to stand on before beginning the more advanced collective skills needed for survival in Afghanistan. We began our training with basic and advanced marksmanship with the M4 Carbine and M9 9 mm pistol. All

First Group SOF personnel carry both of these weapons in combat and are intimately familiar with them, but the support personnel carried either just the M4 Carbine or the M9 pistol. Our training on these two weapons began at a very basic level to ensure that all personnel were comfortable and competent with both weapon systems. In addition, we had to outfit and setup the support weapons with AN/PEQ-2 Infrared Illuminator/Lasers, Surefire TacLites for the M4 and M9, forward grips and assault slings for the M4, and EOTech 552 holographic sights. After individual weapons training, we began familiarization and fire of the crew-served weapons we would employ in Afghanistan: the M2 .50 cal HMG, the Mark 19 MOD 3 40 mm GL, and the M240B 7.62 mm LMG. We mounted and used these crew-served weapons on our up-armor HMMWVs once we were forward in Afghanistan. We conducted additional specialized training for the sniper qualified personnel on three sniper systems: the M24 7.62 mm sniper rifle, the 5.56 mm Mk 12 SPR, and the Barrett .50 cal sniper rifle. After completing the initial familiarization and fire with all the weapons, we moved to more advanced collective tasks, including: dismounted fire and movement, both day and night; mounted fire and movement, both day and night; and basic CQB drills and procedures.

I was worried about how our support personnel and even some of the younger SF BDOC members would react in an emergency medical situation, especially if under fire. I conveyed my anxieties to our BMO and together we devised a training plan to prepare everyone for emergency medical situations that they might encounter during the rotation. More importantly to me, I felt that some tough, realistic medical training would desensitize everyone to the sights and sounds they might encounter during a medical emergency in Afghanistan. The BMO and my team 18D medic (who I had chosen to deploy with us) prepared basic and advanced medical classes and gave those classes to the BDOC members. Additionally, we arranged for live tissue training

(LTT) through Madigan Army Medical Center, which is on Fort Lewis. In its entirety, the training encompassed a week of basic and advanced classroom medical classes, clinical LTT (also known as “goat lab”) and culminated in day and night squad maneuver live fires with live trauma patients. During the live fires, we used smoke pots, hand grenade simulators and M240B machineguns firing at an oblique angle to the maneuver area to add realism, induce stress, and to cause confusion and communication problems among squad members. The squad members had to keep their patients alive for at least one hour including through a hoist operation and subsequent evacuation by helicopter. All personnel performed admirably during this phase of the training and all future BDOC and CENTCOM deployments incorporated our medical training POI into their training schedules. The BDOC members themselves gave us the finest compliments. They said that they were 100% more confident in their medical skills and abilities after undergoing the training and that they felt completely prepared to deal with medical situations on the battlefield. About ten days before our scheduled departure date, I received some troubling news. The Iraq CJSOTF had a small group (100 +/-) of South Korean SOF scheduled to begin a recurring rotation in Iraq and they wanted linguistically capable First Group SOF to deploy with them. The First Group commander selected me to lead one of two composite ODAs pegged for this mission because of my Korean language ability and my SFD-K background. I was adamantly opposed to the Group Commander taking me off the BDOC mission because I had led it since its inception. The next highest-ranking NCO in the BDOC was a promotable staff sergeant. I felt that he would do an adequate job leading the BDOC, but that he would have an extremely difficult time handling and interfacing with the senior NCOs and officers in the CJSOTF HQ. I continued to train with and prepare the BDOC and at the end of the week, my battalion commander was able to get me pulled off the Korean-Iraq list so that I

could deploy with the BDOC. The BDOC deployed to Afghanistan at the end of February 2004. Once in Afghanistan and after an initial transition and indoctrination period, the BDOC force began operations and the CJSOTF staff was enthusiastic in their praise for the professionalism and motivation of the entire BDOC.

The difficulties inherent in forming a combined SOF-support team cannot be understated. Although all of the BDOC SOF NCOs had led troops before, most had become accustomed to the relaxed atmosphere and first name informality that characterizes SF ODAs. Even I found it difficult to handle many of the personal and professional problems that kept popping up because they normally never arise on an SF team, where the lowest ranking member is normally a SSG or promotable SGT. The BDOC as a whole had to overcome many misperceptions and misconceptions between SOF and support. I expected some initial difficulties and obstacles, but until I had to deal directly with them, I admit that I had not really given them much more than a cursory thought. In the defense of the support personnel, I found the majority of them to be well educated, motivated, professional, and willing and eager to learn. I believe that several of them would have no difficulty, either physically or mentally, making the transition to the “dark side” (working in a SOF role). I overcame most of the difficulties within the BDOC through proper planning and preparation for this abnormal integration of SOF and support personnel. I also remained ever vigilant in identifying problems and dealing with those problems promptly. Functional SOF-support composite units are a viable force and can function at very high level. Ultimately, as in my experience with the BDOC, the professionalism, and dedication of the NCOs within the unit make the difference between success and failure.

Appendix 1-Acronyms

ANCOC: Advanced Noncommissioned Officer Course

AN/PEQ-2: An infrared target pointer/illuminator/aiming laser used on a variety of U.S. Army weapons

AOR: Area of Responsibility

ASOT: Advanced Special Operations Tactics

BDOC: Base Defense Operations Center

BMO: Battalion Medical Officer

CENTCOM: Central Command

CJSOTF-A: Combined Joint Special Operations Task Force-Afghanistan

COB: Close Quarters Battle

HMG: Heavy Machinegun

HMMWV: High Mobility Multipurpose Wheeled Vehicle

JCET: Joint Combined Exchange Training

JUSMAGTHAI: Joint United States Military Advisory Group Thailand

LMG: Light Machinegun

LTT: Live Tissue Training

NCO: Noncommissioned Officer

NCOIC: Noncommissioned Officer in Charge

ODA-XXX: Operational Detachment Alpha (the three numbers following the hyphen identify group, battalion, company, and team)

OEF: Operation ENDURING FREEDOM

OEF-P: Operation ENDURING FREEDOM-PHILIPPINES

OIF: Operation IRAQI FREEDOM

OPLAN: Operations Plan

PACOM: Pacific Command

SF: Special Forces

SF O&I: Special Forces Operations and Intelligence

SFARTAETC: Special Forces Advanced Reconnaissance, Target Analysis, and Exploitation
Techniques Course

SFD-K: Special Forces Detachment-Korea

SOCPAC: Special Operations Command Pacific

SOF: Special Operations Forces

SOR: Statement of Requirements

SOTIC: Special Operations Target Interdiction Course

SOT: Special Operations Tactics

SPR: Special Purpose Rifle

TOW: Tube Launched Optically Tracked Command Link Wire Guided Missile

USASFC: United States Army Special Forces Command

USSOF: United States Special Operations Forces