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INCREASING EFFECTIVENESS OF LOCAL PARTNERSHIPS

in Counter Insurgency with Commercial Imagery


BY MAJ MARK COBOS, 1ST SPACE BATTALION S3



he first of GEN Stanley McChrystal's Eight Imperatives for Success in Afghanistan addresses the basic tenet of modern counterinsurgency: "We must protect and partner with the security forces, tribal and governmental leaders, and local councils to build their capacity to secure their own countries and reinforce local institutions." In fact, the fundamental core of Coalition success in counterinsurgency operations in Afghanistan and Iraq is this ability to form meaningful partnerships that help to advance multiple lines of operation in parallel. Unfortunately, self-imposed classification barriers are often preventing our Warfighters – captains, lieutenants, and sergeants – access to some of the most useful tools in our Counter Insurgency kit bag, not only decreasing the effectiveness of local partnerships with Afghans and Iraqis but sometimes with other coalition allies as well. As we know, pictures are worth a thousand words, and unclassified imagery provided by the Army's 1st Space Brigade Commercial Imagery Team (CIT) can be openly shared with local security partners, tribal leaders, municipal department managers, or coalition allies and is an increasingly important tool in partnership operations.

As the company commander for the CIT charged with supporting the city of Rutbah in Anbar Province, I quickly learned that the vast majority of our police force, municipal engineers, city council subcommittee leaders, muqtars, tribal leaders, and pretty much anybody with whom my platoon and squad leaders needed to partner were ... not very good at reading maps. It was a major challenge to find a local leader who could read our military maps, even in the areas they lived in for decades. Simple cultural differences yield significant barriers to partnership efforts.

However, civilians who could not read a map could report Improvised Explosive Device locations and cache sites using Army-provided unclassified imagery. Our efforts to plan operations with local police using a map and sand table resulted in mutual frustration until imagery products allowed them to visualize the battlefield. We coached the City Council's Infrastructure Subcommittee and the Water Department Manager on their proposal for a new city-wide water distribution system ahead of their meeting with the State Department's Provincial



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Reconstruction Team. Their proposal seemed destined for failure for lack of detail and project management until we overlaid the plan on a massive picture of the city at half-meter resolution. Our nascent Agricultural Subcommittee developed the details of the government seed distribution plan using recently acquired commercial imagery of farmland throughout the district. Commanders and platoon leaders reading this article undoubtedly understand the benefits of changing their FBCB2 (Force XXI Battle Command, Brigade-and-Below) monitors from map to imagery to get a point across to someone on the battlefield that is beyond the comprehension of a frustrated interpreter.

Close partnership activities often require the use of unclassified imagery products, but much of the imagery obtained from National Technical Means can only be classified as low as Secret, releasable to three or four of our closest Coalition Allies. Although National Technical Means imagery is crucial to our intelligence collection efforts, it provides little to no assistance to local partnerships because a commander cannot lay this imagery on the hood of a HMMWV and plan a joint operation with local security forces or tribal leaders. Our attempts to teach security forces, municipal engineers, and ambulance drivers to use Google Earth were only marginally effective because the database lacks many of the areas in which we operate and much of the imagery is outdated. Our battalion and company commanders, platoon leaders, squad leaders, and battlefield partners require access to high resolution unclassified imagery taken only days or weeks from their request in order to enhance their partnership efforts at the local level.

High resolution, unclassified commercial imagery can be quickly obtained by warfighters directly from the Army Commercial Imagery Team located in Bahrain and can greatly enhance local partnership efforts. The Commercial Imagery Team has a service-level agreement with National Geospatial-Intelligence Agency that allows immediate archive of commercial imagery collects from two large commercial vendors, DigitalGlobe and GeoEye. The imagery archive grows by several terabytes each month with updated collections of half-meter panoramic and multi-spectral imagery of requested terrain. Requests from a battalion or brigade for a new collect can be delivered in as few as 24–36 hours and recently archived imagery can be delivered almost immediately, all unclassified and capable of sharing with local partners.

Deployed units can contact National Geospatial-Intelligence Agency or the Commercial Imagery Team to request an account

to the Rapid Delivery of Online Geospatial-Intelligence and view locations and metadata of recently imaged areas. With this information units can directly contact the Commercial Imagery Team and request specific imagery to suit their specific requirements. The Commercial Imagery Team will package imagery requests as a PDF, MrSID, GeoTIFF, NITF or JPEG2000 and send the imagery to the requesting unit, who can then manipulate the image with icons denoting hospitals, schools, municipal nodes, mosques, or whatever unclassified information is necessary to assist in partnership operations. The Commercial Imagery Team also sends Mobile Training Teams to Afghanistan and Iraq to teach TALONVIEW and Google Earth classes to requesting units and Afghani/Iraqi governmental organizations.

In the “ISAF (International Security Assistance Force) Commander’s Counterinsurgency Guidance,” GEN McChrystal talks about partnering with the Afghanistan National Security Force at all echelons:

Build their capacity to secure their own country. Foster ownership – their success is our success. Live and train together, plan and operate together. Share the same battle-rhythm and information. Integrate your command and control structures. Put them in the lead and support them, even before they think they are ready. Coach them to excellence and they will amaze you with how quickly they take charge.

Partnerships at the local level can be greatly enhanced by sharing a common operating picture using recent commercial imagery from the Commercial Imagery Team. Partnerships sharing a common operating picture using unclassified imagery are much more likely to achieve GEN McChrystal’s partnership imperative and can help commanders leverage existing capabilities to overcome language and culture barriers. Units can request products from their local National Geospatial-Intelligence Agency–Geospatial Support Team, an Army Topo Team or directly from the Commercial Imagery Team by e-mail at eagle.vision@me.navy.smil.mil or via DSN at 318-439-6215. Commercial Imagery can also be downloaded from the Unclassified National Information Library Web-based Access and Retrieval Portal at <https://warp.nga.mil>. Questions concerning the scope of Commercial Imagery Team capabilities should be addressed to the 1st Space Brigade’s Commercial Imagery Cell (Jeffrey.lakey@smdc-cs.army.mil; DSN: 692-8742/1139) or the 1st Space Battalion S3, MAJ Mark Cobos (mark.cobos@smdc-cs.army.mil; DSN: 692-1905). 