



# CompanyCommand

Building Combat-Ready Teams



**To:** Company Commanders  
**From:** Company Commanders

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## Afghan Counterinsurgency: In the Words of the Commanders

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In these pages, company commanders of Task Force Spartan (3rd Brigade, 10th Mountain Division) have gathered with you to share their hard-earned knowledge—knowledge borne of sweat and blood, forged in the rugged and sometimes ruthless mountains, valleys and plains of Afghanistan. Having served the last 15 months in combat, they know as well as anyone right now how your preparation can and will make the difference between life and death, between success and failure. They want to serve you and make a difference for you. They are in it with you!

**Scott Horrigan**  
A/2-87 IN (Paktika)

When I came to this deployment, I had no idea how tough it was going to be. I'd been in Afghanistan as a lieutenant, and the two deployments don't even compare. Afghanistan is a different place two years later. As I look back on it now, I see that my understanding of counterinsurgency (COIN) operations—my understanding of working with tribes, with religion and with the people, instead of fighting the enemy (those are two totally different things)—has grown immensely.

Three to four years ago, when we were in Afghanistan, we were cordoning off entire valleys, raiding and clearing caves, and probably not getting into a fight or finding a single thing. Then we'd leave the area, and we wouldn't come back. We'd color it green on a map somewhere. Now we arrive in an area and we stay there, we develop a relationship, we build rapport with the people, and we have the ability to actually measure whether we've done a good job or not.

My understanding of counterinsurgency operations has increased dramatically from the attitude that we have to kill as many of these guys as we can, to: OK, do I have a governor? Do I have a chief of police capable of doing his job, and does he have the weapons and the vehicles to do his job? Have the *shura* leaders merged with my operations, and am I targeting them properly? Am I handling the money that is available as far as commanders' emergency response program money, humanitarian assistance supplies and medical assistance supplies are concerned? How am I using those assets that are available to me?

My way of thinking did a 180 from when I first got here.

**Jim McKnight**  
A/1-32 IN (Kunar)

Reference that ridgeline 1,000 meters away getting me in trouble—guys always popping their heads up, taking their shots and then getting back down. I came up with a big tactical plan involving a complex obstacle, some ambushes, some long-range claymores—all kinds of ideas to protect that piece of terrain or deny it to the enemy. I sent out my plan to all the other company commanders and said, "Hey, guys, I could use your help and any thoughts you have."

Joe Evans, from Company B, came back to me with: "Your plan is textbook, but if you don't get the people, you are going to be dealing with that ridgeline forever." I thought that was so telling about the counterinsurgency. In the northern part of the valley, as the people have come around, the enemy has just stopped. There is this very intangible feeling you get when the human terrain becomes "pro." You don't need to work nearly as hard at defending yourself; you still have to do it, but there is a lot of security that you just can't explain that comes with a bunch of kids asking for another piece of candy. You have to do the lethal piece, but if you're not eventually getting to the hearts and minds of the people, you're just wasting your time.

Our guys have conducted extended operations in austere environments. They've typically lived without a shower for 30 days, eating MREs for that time, and we've had to learn a lot of field craft that is required when you live like that: purifying drinking water from streams, hygiene with baby wipes and sewing up your clothes. It all goes back to the population. We do all the things that extended operations require in order to live *with* the population—to secure them, to get intelligence from them, to drive the enemy out, to deny him safe haven.

If we lived on the forward operating base (FOB), there is no way we could get to the population.

### **Rob Stanton**

**C/1-32 IN (Kunar)**

The very first thing we did was ensure that we lived with the people and that we lived in the enemy's backyard. I didn't fully realize its importance until I had done it for a while. You read about it in counterinsurgency theory, but it doesn't really click in your mind until you actually do it. We established three firebases in my battle space that are literally on the side of the road. They were established with Humvees; we strung out some wire and that was it—that's where we lived.

We were within the village limits; we could look outside the wire where local nationals were walking up and down the road and coming to see us; we could look at the local nationals' houses—I mean we were right there. And right off the bat it made a difference because no one had ever done this here before. Everyone up in this area of responsibility worked out of Asadabad or Camp Blessing, and the only time they went out among the populace was to conduct operations. So the people only saw U.S. Soldiers when they were showing up to kick the door in, or conducting a night counter-improvised explosive device patrol, or carrying out a major operation with a massive amount of Coalition forces in your backyard. It was the first time that the Afghans had the opportunity to reach out and touch us, when we were not dealing with them in a threatening manner. We were there, sitting on the side of the road. You couldn't miss us: 35 Humvees and 60 Soldiers hanging out, going on missions, walking into the village, having lunch with the elders.

In a lot of ways, it endeared the populace to us. You probably can't fully endear them to us because we are Americans and they are Afghans, but to be with them every day is priceless. You get to know the people, and the people get to know you; they are not as afraid of you, and you *show* them that the government is the better option and is here to stay. When you look at the elder and the *shura* leaders and can say, "I live here, too. I'm out here getting shot at just as you are," you have a shared experience with the people. They



*Capt. Jim McKnight observes 155 mm artillery fires from the Korengal outpost within minutes after receiving enemy mortar and sniper fires.*



*This is the view members of one platoon have from their outpost located directly along the Pech River Road.*

respect that a lot, and it makes it a lot easier to deal with them and to get support and information.

### **Joe Hansen**

**B/4-25 FA (Kunar & Nuristan)**

One interesting experience that stands out for me is when we brought in the 155 mm howitzers, which have never been in the Hindu Kush mountains. Arable land here in Kunar Province is extremely precious, so it became a po-

*Rob Stanton spends quality time with local Afghans.*



tential point of contention with the locals when we needed to expand Camp Blessing for the howitzers and a landing zone (LZ). One concern we had was saving the soil on the land that will eventually go back to the people. After many conversations, we decided to defer to the locals on how best to preserve their land. The “Afghan way” was to resod the LZ using little plots of grass from the river.

They resodded the entire LZ! It took about a month, but it was worth the effort. Aesthetically, it looks great and is a visible symbol of our commitment to being good stewards. We also planted vegetables along the berms that surround the LZ—melons, squash and other things, that will go to the *zakat* (alms for poor locals).

The people’s concerns become our concerns. In everything we do here, we try to find a way to achieve the mission and support the people. These two things are intertwined, each affecting the other.

At Camp Blessing, my first sergeant became the FOB mayor, and I became the FOB commander, primarily dealing with the day-to-day contact and interaction with the people and local leaders. Continuity is important to stability and security. My continued day-to-day presence and focus on developing relationships with the people (district governor, police chief and others) have made a big difference.

Interestingly, the 155 guns give me an added level of prestige with the Afghan people. Those guns are a powerful symbol of our kinetic power. In six months, we have gone from Camp Blessing receiving attacks upwards of three to four times a week to receiving a single rocket attack maybe once a month. And the people are the biggest part of that. Innovative and resourced nonkinetic operations will always be important; ultimately, though, the people are the ones who establish the security. Security and stability materialize when the people decide that they will no longer tolerate a communal enemy. When they make that collective decision, we step into the realm of success. And my presence day in and day out affirming Coalition support has helped that to happen. The people see and hear Coalition forces taking the fight to the enemy while we simultaneously address their concerns, from infrastructure development all the way down to personal relationships. At a certain point, the community takes up the “information operations (IO) guidon” and marches with it. This can be a long process, with much patience required, but it is well worth the effort when your desired effects are realized.

As infantry and provincial reconstruction teams (PRTs) and others move forward in their counterinsurgency efforts, the howitzers come in behind them. We are set up and packaged to provide fires support; we are also set up to provide IO support. We are solidifying the stability gains and allowing the infantry to push forward and expand the security bubble.

The key to IO is using effective systems and leaders. There are 29 *shuras*—29 groups of elders in this valley. They are the primary voice of the people, the primary conduits to stability in this area. When we first got here, they were not engaged, nor were the *ulema* (the religious *shuras*). I was lucky and



*The “Afghan way” of resodding the landing zone at Forward Operating Base (FOB) Blessing commences plug by plug.*



*Building projects help foster good relations between the people and their government leaders. Here, Capt. Joe Hansen uses a development project as a catalyst for this kind of relationship building.*

had a very effective governor. We consolidated those 29 *shuras* and created a mega *shura*—and then brought the *ulema* into that. With our governor's great diplomatic efforts, we brought them together, found common ground and started to address and solve issues. As we did that, stability and security in this area started to flow outwards. It started to work here. My role in that could be described as a coach, mentor and Coalition adviser to the governor. Any unilateral action is counterproductive, and we usually will feel the effects of it in our ongoing operations.

### **Steve Helm**

**C/2-87 IN (Paktika, Kandahar, Ghazni)**

Everything with counterinsurgency revolves around population. Picture a diagram with population in the center; everything else has to feed into that. Tell your soldiers, "Hey, look, we are affecting the population with everything we do." That is the key to COIN. If you can bring the population to your side, you will eliminate the insurgency.

Use Afghan leaders you partner with in lead roles during leader engagements. You make the biggest contribution by mentoring the leaders you work with before the meeting happens, and then remaining in the background during the engagement.

We recently invited every mayor, police chief and *shura* member from all four of my districts to come to the Afghan National Army side of our FOB to do what we call a "super *shura*." You have to have an agenda or things will get off track. In this case, the Afghan company commander I partner with was the keynote speaker. The day before the *shura*, I met with him to lay out an agenda. Then we put time limits on each subject, because if you don't you'll go into a meeting and people will run off on tangents and you'll be chasing your tail in circles.

During the *shura*, my leaders and I were visible, but we tried to allow the Afghan company commander to drive

things. He brought the meeting to order and discussed the items on the agenda. On a couple of occasions, I had my interpreter whisper something that the Afghan commander had forgotten, but otherwise we stayed in the background. The *shura* leaders are going to look at you and say, "He's the American who is leaving in six months or a year," but the local leader is going to be here long-term.

Treat Afghan Security Forces and the embedded U.S. trainers as true partners. When I work with an Afghan commander, I talk to him as a fellow

commander and member of the team. I'll share my general concept for the operation and ask for his help. Then, he'll provide insight and concerns, and we will work through it together. You have to talk to your Afghan counterparts; you cannot alienate them. They are the main effort, and you have to treat them that way.

### **Ben Hung**

**HHC/ 3rd BSTB (Logar & Nangahar)**

One of the major innovations in Logar Province was actually first suggested by the governor and then put into action by the battalion commander and our company: the creation of the Provincial Coordination Center (PCC). This C2 node is a meeting place for Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF)—Afghan National Police (ANP), Afghan National Army and the National Directorate of Security—to discuss security issues, coordinate mission support and decide on mutually supporting responses/quick reaction force missions. Before this creation, there was really no system established, and most things were to be coordinated over the phone or in various meeting spots throughout the province. The PCC has empowered the ANSF and also created more of a partnership between forces. Every mission, with the exception of resupply convoys and security meetings, includes some combination of ANA or ANP support. These combined missions build ANSF credibility as a legitimate and competent arm of the government of Afghanistan and show U.S. cooperation with Afghans that temper arguments of "occupation."

### **Perry Stiemke**

**A/ 3rd BSTB (SAPPER) (Paktia & Nangahar)**

At around the fourth month of command and conducting combat operations, I discovered that the key to success in Afghanistan is the people. It was during Eid; the entire company was operating out of FOB Zormat, and we had just suffered our second ambush within a three-day period.

*Establishing FOB Wilderness in the critical K-G Pass gave the people tangible evidence that their government was serious about creating a secure environment.*

The attack had taken place along a well traveled route in the middle of the night. Thankfully, there were no injuries during this one and, as far as we could tell, there were no casualties taken by the enemy.

We have nothing to show from the attack except that we traded rounds. I'm not disappointed with this, but with the fact that it seems like we were off target in our strategy. The killing of insurgents that night would have been seen as a success. Yet, that very killing of insurgents could itself create more insurgents, given the nature of Afghan society.

The local people know who conducted the attack. I've probably met or talked to one of the attackers during a *shura*. Ironically, they continue to ask for support from us. The thought occurred to me that I've been off target in trying to attack the insurgency force-for-force. Instead, if we target and win the support of the people, they will either in-



fluence or turn in the insurgents. At a minimum, the insurgency will come to us instead of us chasing ghosts in the middle of the night. If we alienate the people through unfocused violence, abandon them after we get a target, or use them to our own gains, the people will continue to shelter and quietly support the insurgents for their own gain through our unknowing support.

### **Task Force Spartan Counterinsurgency Strategy**

**By Col. John Nicholson**

The overarching Task Force (TF) Spartan strategy during Operation Enduring Freedom (OEF)-VII has been to:

- Separate the enemy from the population.
- Achieve effects with the population through its government.
- Transform the environment both tangibly and intangibly so that the enemy is no longer welcome.

This strategy can be effectively implemented only when both U.S. and Afghan forces live among the people. TF Spartan recognized this and nearly tripled its footprint by establishing company- and platoon-sized outposts across the area of operations, selecting locations important in both the physical and human terrains. When combined U.S. and Afghan security elements move into an area and stay, they radically change the dynamics of the environment. Presence enables relationships with the people, develops their confidence in their own government and security forces, and continuously pressures the enemy.

While a population-focused strategy relies heavily on nonkinetic means, it increases kinetic operations as well. "Planting the flag" in the heart of known enemy sanctuaries dislocates the enemy, both physically and psychologi-

cally. He must fight back or lose. TF Spartan experienced a sharp rise in combat over previous rotations, but thanks to the close combat skill and firepower of American units, killed exponentially more enemy than suffered friendly casualties. The metric of enemy dead is not useful in gauging counterinsurgency success, but it does provide insight into the degree to which a unit has separated the enemy from the populace. Killing, capturing, forcing to flee or convincing the enemy to reconcile are all ways to achieve separation. This is a continuous process, but once begun, it buys space and time for the company commander and his leaders to achieve effects with the populace.

By integrating Afghan National Security Forces at every opportunity, connecting the people to their government and setting the conditions for economic development through road building and other projects, the population is convinced that their best hope for a brighter future lies with the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan (IRoA). If the enemy attempts to regain influence, they return to find a transformed environment that is no longer hospitable to them. This transformation does not occur overnight, but through months, often years, of determination, relationship building, economic development and IRoA capacity building.



*Capt. Dennis Sugrue gathers with village leaders when 3-71 CAV was just establishing a base of operations at Kamdesh, Nuristan.*

**Dennis Sugrue**

**HHT/3-71 CAV (Kunar, Nuristan)**

We have conducted very few offensive operations here. In a counterinsurgency, this is important. We focus our efforts on appealing to the population centers. When the population starts to like us, the enemy comes looking for a fight.

Winning over a population is, in part, winning over the leadership. You do this through developing relationships. One thing that won me a lot of ground initially was sitting

and spending two hours to conduct a 10-minute meeting. That's difficult for Americans to do. Our emphasis on reconstruction projects was our reason and our motivation to get into the towns and stay close with the people. Focus on the people.

One of the most effective ideas our squadron has put into action is a new radio station that has created a way to communicate with the population (90 percent of whom are illiterate in this area) who did not have a reliable radio station before now. We hired local nationals who broadcast in the four main languages of the area. Programming includes things like readings from the Koran, poetry and news: local, national, international. It gives us a platform to communicate ANSF advancement, Coalition forces' successes, like completion of a reconstruction project, and enemy blunders, like the time they caused a fire that burned a local school. The ability to communicate like this with the people is priceless. Counterinsurgency battles are won with genuine concern and a connection at the personal level. They are lost with bullets and the overuse of force.

**About CompanyCommand**

CC is a place for company-level commanders—current, past and future—to connect and share ideas and experiences. This is YOUR forum—it is voluntary, grassroots, by and for company commanders and is focused like a laser beam on CompanyCommand. By joining, you are gaining access to an amazing community of professionals who love Soldiers and are committed to building combat-ready teams. Collectively, as a profession, we possess the knowledge that can enable us to build and lead our units more effectively. With this in mind, please participate, contribute and tap into the experiences of others. You'll never know the full impact of taking a moment to share your experience with others!

**Connecting leaders**



*Art by Jody Harmon*

The CC space is organized around Leadership, Warfighting, Training, Fitness, Supply, Maintenance, Force Protection and Soldiers & Family.

We also have an area specifically for Professional Reading, as well as the CDR's Log where commanders are journaling their command experiences. And, if you are preparing for command, we recommend you check out the "1st 90 Days" topic located in the Leadership Section of the web site. If CC is adding value to you, encourage your platoon leaders to check out their forum—a forum that is centered on excellence in platoon leadership—at

<http://platoonleader.army.mil>.

Send article ideas to [tony.burgess@us.army.mil](mailto:tony.burgess@us.army.mil).

Company Commanders connect at <http://CompanyCommand.army.mil>.