



# CompanyCommand

*Building Combat-Ready Teams*



**To:** Company Commanders

**From:** Company Commanders

## **Combined Action in Afghanistan**

Our Army has been talking about “Afghans in the lead,” partnering and mentorship since Operation Anaconda in March 2002, so it is easy *not* to catch the importance of a change that has occurred during this last year in Afghanistan—an important change in how we partner with Afghan

National Security Forces (ANSF). In this “CompanyCommand,” we—commanders from 4th Brigade Combat Team (BCT), 25th Infantry Division (Airborne), based out of Fort Richardson, Alaska—describe that change and hope that we adequately convey, without overstating, the impact it can have.

### **COL Michael Howard**

**Commander, 4/25 (ABN)**

**Paktika, Paktia, Khost (P2K) Provinces**

During our recent deployment, GEN [Stanley A.] McChrystal directed us to begin “embedded partnership,” which combined the previous mentorship and partnership programs, and clarified it as the maneuver commander’s responsibility. My boss in Afghanistan, MG [Curtis M.] Scaparrotti, enacted this new guidance under the name combined action (CA). CA is a great innovation, but it’s not totally new. The term as he used it came from FM 3-24 *Counterinsurgency*, with roots in the USMC’s “Combined Action Program” in Vietnam, which included embedding Marine Corps squads in Vietnamese defense forces on a long-term basis. Similarly, MG “Scap” directed us to collocate, to live together, with our ANSF counterparts.

Before we started CA, my BCT split the security line of effort between enemy-focused operations (mostly planned and led by us) and developing the ANSF. After we started CA, our mission *was* the ANSF. Everything was about them; we focused on their operations and on their development. MG Scap didn’t just direct that infantry embed with infantry and MPs embed with MPs. He wanted more—e.g., S-1s with S-1s, S-2s with S-2s, S-4s with S-4s, medics with medics, engineers with engineers. You get the picture.

Mid-tour, we taught ourselves the Afghan systems: logistics, personnel, intelligence, fires, maintenance, etc. If I could prepare my brigade to deploy a second time, I would make teaching American leaders the Afghan support systems a priority training event. I found a few experts in the brigade com-

bat team in these areas and put them on the road, visiting every company and teaching them these systems. Teaching the systems was much easier than convincing the Afghans to use their systems and forcing American junior leaders to stop circumventing the Afghan systems. This took discipline because the average U.S. junior officer or NCO will do whatever is required to get a mission accomplished rapidly, even provide support directly to the Afghans instead of using their systems. This expediency is useful in the near term, but in the long term, circumventing the Afghan support systems is simply delaying their development and prolonging the war.

Combined action began changing that immediately. First, corruption dropped. It is hard to be dishonest when you live and work with a partner who is not dishonest. Corruption isn’t gone, but CA has been a big part of reducing it. Second, the managing of current operations improved 95 percent. When my Soldiers and the Afghans moved into the

*First Sergeant Shane Pospisil pins an Eagle Medallion on a kandak (battalion) medical platoon sergeant while CPT Stephen Magennis prepares to hand him a Certificate of Appreciation. Small gestures like this paid big dividends in strengthening the relationship between U.S. and Afghan forces.*



same CPs [command posts] and TOCs [tactical operations centers], we opened a new world for them. It was right before my eyes for years, but I never realized that my Afghan partners did not have a current ops or CHOPs [chief of operations] capability. Finally, the ANSF combat support systems improved—pay, maintenance, logistics and more. I am not trying to overstate this. There is still a lot of room to grow. My point is: combined action yields results quickly.

**Stephen Magennis and 1SG Shane Pospisil**

**C/1-501st Infantry  
Paktika Province**

Initially, we were not colocated with Afghan National Security Forces. Even if you are just a few minutes down the road, that is not good enough. With combined action, the expectation became that U.S. forces partnered with Afghan forces one level up and actually lived with them. As a company commander, I was to partner with a battalion commander. We established a joint TOC. Platoon leaders partnered with Afghan company commanders or a district police force. And at battalion level, we built a TOC for the Afghan brigade right next to our battalion TOC. The idea is to live, train, plan and execute with our ANSF partners so that we can mentor them, they can see what right looks like and we can better influence them to use their systems proficiently.

Before we lived together, I could spend an entire day trying to find and talk with a key leader in the Afghan National Security Forces. We didn't have cell-phone towers, so I couldn't just call him. I would literally have to plan and run a patrol to try to find him. Moreover, when they lived 20 minutes down the road, we'd plan an operation and then basically grab some Afghan soldiers whom we would brief up on the way. This gave them a negative attitude, which fed our attitude. Colocating—living together—made us feel much more like equals, which affected their commitment.

The other thing that happened is that we spent a lot more time informally, eating together, talking and building much stronger relationships. I had dinner every night with our part-

ner battalion commander. Those dinners were essentially nightly BUBs [battle update briefs] and became planning meetings as well.

The second part is the logistics part of combined action. Before, they [Afghan soldiers] would come to us and ask us for things, and if we could, we'd try to get it to them through our supply system. Combined action brought most of that to a halt. We served as a forcing function to have them exercise their logistics system. We had to put our foot down—and that was painful at times—but, in the end, they respected us for helping them to learn and use their own systems.

**Justin Pritchard**

**A/425 BSTB (Engineer)  
Khost Province**

One of the challenges we faced with combined action was having a platoon with each Afghan battalion. We set up an SOP [standard operating procedure] where the first SL was responsible for S-1, the second SL was maintenance and property accountability, the third SL dealt with supply (S-4), etc. They worked directly with the Afghan battalion primary staff officers. Picture a SSG saying, "OK, major, let's go do our weapons inventory this month, and here's how you do it." This can be a little daunting for squad leaders who have never thought about training a battalion staff. We kept it simple. "SSG, you've signed a hand receipt before; you have more knowledge than this 40-year-old Afghan officer. Look at the basics; you can do it."

If I were going into this again, I would want to train the NCOs ahead of time about how a battalion staff works, how to keep the battalion commander updated, how to do a staff estimate, etc. I had some squad leaders who did extremely well at this. They came at it with humility and an attitude of "I have a lot to teach you, but you have a lot to teach me." With that kind of attitude, you can make some big gains.

The big breakthrough for me personally was shifting from "I'm here to solve problems and to make it happen" to helping the *Afghans* solve their problems. It was a shift in mind-set, a reframing of my role and purpose. I went from hearing a report of a bomb and immediately taking action to going to the Afghan battalion commander and district governor and asking them how they wanted to handle it. You come at it almost like you are an OC [observer/controller] with combined action. You aren't the one solving the problems; rather, you are developing your counterparts and getting them to think things through.

**Jim Wiese**

**B/3-509 PIR  
Paktika Province**

I worked with the Afghan national army [ANA], border police and national police. When we first arrived, our focus was on finding out what they needed



*At the Lakan Shura in Khost Province, local elders meet with a broad group of Afghan army and police leaders to discuss security and economic development. Since the implementation of the Combined Action Program, Justin Pritchard (lower left) has seen his role shift from problem solver to coach and mentor.*



*CPT Jim Wiese (right) chooses to remain in the background as an Afghan national army commander and a national police chief discuss voting sites.*

and providing it for them—which, counterintuitively, exacerbated the problem. I was really happy later on in the deployment when the big switch came from the top that said that we are not here to give things away. The Afghan logistics system will never get better if we don't make it work.

After the change to CA, we combined our TOCS so that we had the U.S. Army, Afghan border police, and Afghan army all together, working together in the combined TOC. We learned together how to battle track, report to higher, etc. The Afghan company commander now had to request his own supplies through his battalion. When he did, I also reported to my battalion so that the battalion S-4, for example, could check with the Afghan S-4 to verify that he got the request and then coach and mentor him through the process of responding. We started seeing that a percentage of supplies requested never made it down to the company. Where did the rest go? When we stopped giving them things and started holding their feet to the fire, we identified corruption in the system. We saw a transition to Afghan leaders being held accountable.

One big thing we learned in the 509th is that your purpose in Afghanistan is not to be friendly just for the sake of being friendly. You have to get the job done. Be respectful and develop relationships with your ANSF partners, but hold them accountable. Ultimately, if they were not doing the right thing, I went to their battalion commander and said, "Hey sir, this is not working," and I talked with my battalion commander as well. Some Afghan leaders were removed, while others left—like my Afghan border police chief who left when he realized that he wasn't going to get any more kickbacks. As a result, we had better-quality leaders. The Afghan border police first sergeant, for example, stepped up to become the battalion CSM; his leadership at the battalion level was phenomenal, and you could see the difference that one quality leader can make.

**Josh Sherer**  
**HQB/2-377th PFAR**  
**Khost Province**

We established a joint TOC with the ANA. Suddenly, we were both watching the same RAID [rapid assessment and initial detection] camera feed, hearing each other's intel re-

ports over the radio. Wow, what a difference that made. They had outposts and now, because of the joint TOC, we could instantly communicate with them. We could get them, for example, to instantly take action regarding a suspicious-looking vehicle that we saw with our RAID camera when, before, it would take too long to communicate.

I'm not going to lie; I resisted this idea of a joint TOC initially. I had serious concerns about the Afghans seeing all our capabilities and SIPR [secure Internet protocol router] computers. The complete trust just wasn't there. But now, joint TOCs partnered with ANA—what a difference that made. I could just go up to the Afghan S-3 and say, "What do you want to plan this week? I'm doing these things with my platoon leaders. What do you want to plan for your patrols?" We'd go over our plans and think through which ones made sense to do together. The fact is that it is their country, and we want to build capacity for them. There isn't a better way to do business. I wish I had that joint TOC the entire deployment.

That's definitely the way forward. They get so much better tactically—just basic soldier skills—by having our guys right next to theirs. Putting their mortar beside our mortar: They're learning from our mortar men, taking care of barrels and personal weapons, drinking chai together. The gains we could not make during our first eight months of random partnering once a month we made in two or three weeks because we were living together. Although I wasn't a fan at first, now I preach it.



*CPT Josh Sherer drinks chai with a platoon leader and platoon sergeant from the 3rd Kandak, Afghan national army.*



Combined action partners COL Hossain, 6/1 Kandak commander, and CPT Neal Erickson, C/1-40 CAV troop commander, at Camp Parsa, Afghanistan, following a COIN conference in January.

**Phon Sundara**  
**HHC/1-501st PIR**  
**Paktika Province**

People talk about partnership, but really doing it is the only way we will ever succeed. Developing a true partnership between the U.S. maneuver units and the Afghan National Security Forces is the way to go. It is the only way to make sure the ANSF systems are working. That is what combined action did for our *kandak* [battalion].

As an HHC [headquarters and headquarters company] that took on a maneuver mission, my company's biggest challenge was personnel shortages. This made combined action—and partnering with an Afghan battalion—a stretch for us. We developed a staff section within the company and had someone covering down on all the battalion staff functions so that we could partner with our *kandak*. My 1SG and I worked with the battalion commander and S-3/XO; my training room worked with their S-1; our intel NCO worked with their S-2 on how to gather intel and present it to the battalion commander; and our part-time FSO (he had multiple roles) partnered with the *kandak* fire-support officer.

**Neal Erickson**  
**C/1-40th Cavalry**  
**Paktia Province**

The Soldiers of C/1-40 CAV at COP [Combat Operating Post] Wilderness in the K-G Pass [Khost-Gardez Pass] got a unique opportunity when we started our partnership with 6/1 Kandak. Prior to the emphasis on combined action, we worked with a single ANA company but did minimal joint planning and often ended up just grabbing a truck with four guys and going on a patrol. Sixth Kandak was a brand-new unit, and they immediately fell into a combined-action TOC with the planning space needed to properly conduct battal-

ion-level operations. Each of our Soldiers knew whom he was working with upon the arrival of the ANA and immediately developed lasting bonds as fellow soldiers and warriors. Our daily interaction in a common workspace vastly improved the *kandak's* ability to plan and execute missions. COL Hossain, the *kandak* commander, and I worked together every day for many hours to ensure that he understood COIN [counterinsurgency] and could apply that knowledge to his own campaign plan. By the time we left, the *kandak* often planned and executed missions on their own initiative and would then come to us asking for a platoon to accompany them on the operation.

In addition to the success seen at the *kandak* level, the ANA companies were doing far better than expected after only a few months in the area.

The direct partnership of an ANA company and a U.S. platoon focused on their own district with its subgovernor and ANP was vital to the long-term security and improvement in each district. Platoon leaders worked with company commanders and developed bottom-up plans for their districts. It took some work, but the *kandak*, brigade and corps leadership really started allowing company-level leaders the freedom to plan and execute their own patrol plan. The success of combined action is due to the ANA taking the lead and U.S. soldiers working closely with them to ensure that planning, preparation and execution is done to a high standard.