

Developing Cross-Cultural Competencies at Platoon Level

by CPT Tyler G. Matthews

I served as a platoon leader in Chosen Company, 2-12 Infantry, 4th Infantry Brigade Combat Team, 4th Infantry Division, from October 2012 to May 2014. During that time, our battalion completed a tour in Afghanistan's Regional Command (RC)-East, completed a train-up cycle that culminated in a successful National Training Center rotation and deployed to Zabul Province in RC-South. Amid a relentlessly paced train-up, extensive personnel turnover and pre-deployment preparation, I learned an important lesson: to set the conditions for success, platoon leaders – not battalion staffs or commanders – must take responsibility for providing detailed mission analysis and cross-cultural training to their Soldiers and subordinates.

In late Fall 2013, my platoon was scrambling to complete the mandatory trainings and certifications required before deploying to Afghanistan. We spent many of our days at the readiness center making sure we were healthy, at the ranges making sure our marksmanship was refreshed, and at the company headquarters making sure containers were packed. We knew we were going to Forward Operating Base Apache in Zabul Province, but outside of that basic “where,” we knew very little about the mission ahead.

Army doctrine is clear: to win in a complex world, our Soldiers must have cross-cultural competencies and strong cognitive abilities. Arriving at this endstate is no easy feat, but platoon leaders can and should prepare their Soldiers for success by familiarizing them with the terrain, culture and history of their future operational environment. Doctrine states repeatedly that a robust understanding of terrain, populations and culture is critical to mission success in stability operations, counterinsurgency (COIN) operations and general operations in the complex operational environments of the 21st Century.¹

Accordingly, doctrine presents tools for leaders to employ when analyzing mission variables (mission, enemy, terrain, troops available, time, civil considerations, or METT-TC), terrain analysis (observation and fields of fire, avenues of approach, key terrain, obstacles and movement, and cover and concealment, or OACOK), operational variables (political, military, economic, social, information, infrastructure, physical environment and time, or PMESII-PT) and civilian considerations (areas, structures, capabilities, organizations, people and events, or ASCOPE).² The Army's counterinsurgency manual, Field Manual (FM) 3-24, repeatedly emphasizes the critical need for COIN forces to understand both the operational environment and the culture in which they are fighting.³

Cultural preparedness

Despite Army doctrine's emphasis on the time-intensive exercises of cross-cultural training, our force often fails to properly prepare for the fight. I believe those at the tactical level have difficulties with pre-deployment mission analysis and cross-cultural training because they lack both confidence and time. The final months before deployment time is understandably scarce, and softer elements of preparation such as cultural training and terrain analysis take a backseat to more concrete, measurable tasks such as marksmanship and Soldier-readiness processing. In other words, developing cross-cultural competency is not highly prioritized. Further, I believe most company-level officers are unsure of how to go about conducting a thorough pre-deployment mission analysis that includes culture, and are even less confident in how to present that information to their subordinates.

In the last 90 days before a deployment, company and battalion training calendars become crowded with myriad requirements. Final validation of basic skills, required on-line training and routine Soldier-readiness requirements all compete for the attention of commanders and first sergeants. As a result, it is easy for junior leaders to overlook essential training tasks that will make their formations more prepared to effectively deploy and win. Among the areas most often overlooked are terrain analysis, language training and cultural-awareness training. Platoon leaders must seize opportunities to facilitate discussion and study relevant to their future missions.

Zabul School

With the support of my platoon sergeant and squad leaders, I pieced together a curriculum to help my platoon prepare for Zabul. Some of my Soldiers had learned Pashtu or Dari, and while we didn't have thorough region-specific literature, we did have Soldiers who had been to southern Afghanistan. Between us, we had plenty of collective resources to get important analysis and training started. "Zabul School" seemed an appropriate title for our platoon training effort, and so it was.

Terrain familiarization

Our initial approach to preparing for our relief-in-place (RIP) with the outgoing unit focused on the fundamental aspects of the operational environment. Inspired by David Kilcullen's "Know Your Turf" principle from his "28 Articles of COIN," I focused our early efforts on map reconnaissance.⁴

In Kilcullen's article, he challenges company-grade officers to take time to carefully study the terrain: "Know the people, the topography, economy, history, religion and culture. Know every village, road, field, population group, tribal leader and ancient grievance. Your task is to become the world expert on your district. If you don't know precisely where you will be operating, study the general area. Read the map like a book: study it every night before sleep, and re-draw it from memory every morning, until you understand its patterns intuitively. ... Neglect this knowledge, and it will kill you."⁵

We focused our efforts on familiarizing our Soldiers with Zabul's borders, cities, roads and rivers. Over time, we included the significant mountain ranges and outlying districts. Since we didn't have military maps of Zabul at first, we relied on open-source maps of Afghanistan, RC-South and Zabul from sources like Google Earth.

In practice, our terrain familiarization started with a formal class that resembled elements of the standard operations order. I briefed by orienting and familiarizing the platoon with the province. Next, we engaged in a less formal dialogue in a classroom setting driven by Soldier questions. Where are the population centers in the province? How busy are the roads? What are the main roads and routes around the U.S. bases? Through free-flowing discussion, we created a dialogue where Soldiers and noncommissioned officers (NCOs) with experience in RC-South could answer questions for the less-experienced Soldiers. The questions we couldn't answer became our request-for-information (RFI) list for our battalion's S-2. In the process, our Soldiers started thinking critically and internalizing the most important aspects of the battlespace.

Lastly, we tested our Soldiers' retention of the terrain-based information. Starting in generalities and working toward more detailed questions, we tested our Soldiers' ability to freehand-sketch the province on blank paper. Some caught on more quickly than others, but eventually every Soldier became confident in his understanding of Zabul. Each Soldier knew where Highway 1 bisected the province, why it was important and through which districts it traveled. Further, after only a couple of weeks, each Soldier could draw the province, its key cities, its districts, its roads, its rivers and the surrounding provinces. Each Soldier knew where key cities were located, how large their populations were and what the roads generally looked like. As a result, weeks before we were wheels-up, the platoon was confident that it understood the geography of the battlespace to which it was deploying.

Language and culture

Language and cultural training were the second critical component of our Zabul School curriculum. Three of our platoon's 29 Soldiers had the opportunity to attend Pashtu language training as part of the brigade's pre-deployment training. Those Soldiers had been handpicked to attend training based on their aptitude for learning and their communication skill. These Soldiers introduced the rest of us to Afghan language and culture.

In the final weeks leading up to the deployment, our Pashtu-trained Soldiers led two classes per week on key Pashtu phrases and Afghan cultural norms. Our Soldiers with experience in RC-South or who had some familiarity with the language helped. The classes normally included the introduction of key phrases and vocabulary through PowerPoint slides and practical exercises in buddy teams across the classroom.

Specifically, we rehearsed basic introductions and the most common individual exchanges we anticipated encountering.

In addition to the obvious benefits of knowing key phrases, language training enabled our leaders to discuss the importance of cross-cultural respect, understanding and nonverbal communication. Our Soldiers who had graduated the Advanced Situational Awareness Training (ASAT) course briefed what they had learned about body language and how to use nonverbal clues to pick up signals of fear and anger.

Soldiers with limited language experience learned the importance of nonverbal communication and body language to convey meaning. During the training, several Soldiers demonstrated a natural aptitude to learn key phrases quickly; those Soldiers later excelled as security-force personnel and often took the lead during our partnered operations with Afghan forces.

A final cultural class we developed covered the principles of *Pashtunwali*, the honor code of Pashtu populations residing in Zabul and Kandahar. Once again, with minimal guidance and a short list of suggested reading references, two college-educated junior-enlisted personnel in our platoon took the initiative and delivered an outstanding presentation on *Pashtunwali*. By the end of the class, our Soldiers better understood the importance of hospitality, respect and women to the local Islamic population with which they were most likely to come in contact.

History, situational awareness

The third component of Zabul School consisted of a focused effort on educating our Soldiers on the history of southern Afghanistan, especially with respect to the Taliban in Afghanistan and Pakistan. I have often observed many junior officers and NCOs read widely to familiarize themselves with the history of the enemy they may face and the environment to which they may deploy. Yet only rarely do these lessons-learned make their way down to the Soldier level. In our curriculum, we sought to familiarize the entire platoon with the history of the Taliban and the Afghan population prior to deploying. In an informal classroom setting, we watched a handful of brief documentaries and gave NCOs the opportunities to brief the enemy tactics, techniques and procedures they had observed on past tours.

Beyond history, I challenged our more ambitious younger Soldiers to develop and brief short classes in teams of two or three. In one example, three of our privates delivered a 15-minute presentation on what they felt were the most important of Kilcullen's articles of COIN and how those might come into play on our deployment.

This forum enabled us to leverage and integrate our various educational and experiential backgrounds into constructive dialogues that helped all our Soldiers prepare mentally for the battlespace. These classes were not part of a lengthy program of instruction but instead were the result of brainstorming and curiosity at the platoon level and the soliciting of volunteers to step up and present critical information.

Benefits

In total, our platoon spent about 12 formal hours over the course of four weeks carrying out the Zabul School curriculum described previously, not including any outside time our subordinate leaders used to expand further. Through observation and leader feedback, I found the return on investment for those 12 hours well worth their weight.

Our platoon's leadership was well prepared to make the most of our brief RIP/transfer of authority. We were prepared to cope with the constraints of the quick transition with the outgoing unit. Because of our familiarity with the terrain and geography, we were able to ask detailed questions that led to more nuanced lessons learned and mission analysis from the outgoing platoons. Furthermore, our familiarity with the main routes and districts allowed us to simply fill in the gaps with the details that experience and advanced imagery can provide rather than starting from zero.

Our emphasis on language and culture greatly mitigated risk when working with our Afghan partners. Less than a week into our deployment, our platoon was interacting with Afghan soldiers and leaders on bases

across Zabul. From our riflemen to our squad leaders, our personnel were confident they could build relationships, establish baseline behavior in our partnered elements and identify anomalies representing heightened risk. As a result, I never doubted that our platoon's Soldiers would be respectful and cordial to our Afghan partners.

Our Soldiers benefited professionally and personally from Zabul School. Professionally, Soldiers developed confidence in their briefing skills and improved their ability to think critically about their operating environment. Soldiers also benefited on the personal, more intangible level. Some of my Soldiers told me that they had gone entire tours in the past without being able to point out their province's location on a map of Afghanistan. To me, that reflects poor, incomplete leadership from company-level officers. It is unsatisfactory for leaders to tell subordinates that terrain, culture and historical variables are important to operational success and yet postpone discussions of the variables of ASCOPE and OACOK until after the deployment's in-brief. Zabul School provided a medium for our platoon's leadership to help our Soldiers "gain intellectual advantages over adversaries through cross-cultural competencies," consistent with the Army operational concept's challenge.⁶

Lessons-learned and recommendations

Outside of the challenge of finding time for our training curriculum in the busy training calendar, the greatest challenge was how to go about getting started with mission analysis. How exactly do we train the "cross-cultural competencies" required to fight and win at the platoon level? While imperfect, Zabul School was certainly a learning experience for me.

I learned that platoon leaders must lead from the front if they are to develop platoons of cross-culturally competent Soldiers. In my case, I used my familiarity with basic frameworks – METT-TC, OACOK and PMESII-PT – to put together the first couple of hours of briefs. In doing so, I framed the subsequent classes and established a foundation on which the training could build. Most importantly, I recognized early that the platoon's collective commitment to learning cross-culturally would reflect the attitude of my platoon sergeant, SFC Kristopher Bettinger, and my platoon's three squad leaders. Their buy-in was essential. As the platoon's leadership, we made it clear that we highly prioritized learning about the operational environment. And because we approached the task with both the seriousness and humility required for learning, our Soldiers did, too.

The best classroom training occurred when Soldiers were fully engaged in an informal, classroom environment. I learned that both atmosphere and setting are immensely important to achieving results. I realized early on that many of my Soldiers had little to no experience abroad, spoke one language and had never conducted the type of terrain and civil analysis essential for developing cross-cultural understanding. We needed to approach the task with humility and in a way that facilitated regular mature discussion on complex issues. In terms of setting, we learned that a closed classroom was more effective than a more trafficked area with potential for distractions.

With respect to the atmosphere, we emphasized from the first engagements that this was a collective learning effort as a platoon – we were all in this together. We encouraged questions and feedback from every level and took each inquiry seriously. Our Soldiers showed a tremendous capacity for learning and retaining terrain analysis, and a hunger to know more about the areas in which they would fight. In fact, the best RFIs I generated from the training did not come from my seasoned NCOs but from curious gunners who had never deployed.

Using the skills and talents of Soldiers of all ranks and backgrounds for the purpose of learning about culture is essential. I challenged my Soldiers who had strong presentation skills, experience abroad and advanced education. Julian Son and Jonathan Gorong – both privates at the time – put together the slideshow on Kilcullen's articles of COIN. SPCs Chris Whitfield and Franky Becerra, our resident Pashtu-course graduates, led our language training. SGTs Cody Graves and Marty Heckman, Afghanistan veterans who were well-read on international relations, helped motivate Soldiers like PFC Nick Denbow to teach the platoon about *Pashtunwali*. Without question, the most valuable discussions were those that stemmed from the classes taught by these eager and intellectually curious Soldiers.

There were also more nuanced takeaways that aided the training's effectiveness. I learned to start the training early and to not overreach. Getting started early was critical. Eventually, our battalion staff provided exceptional smartbooks and language cards to the Soldiers across the battalion that aided with mission analysis and narrowed the focus areas, but if we had waited for these products to start our training, we would have been severely disadvantaged. Instead of relying on these aids as a base, we instead used them to fill in specific gaps in the knowledge we had built through our curriculum.

Equally critical was making sure that our curriculum's goals and pace were manageable and realistic for both the platoon and myself. We assessed that an hour a day would quickly lead to burnout, and an hour every three weeks would probably be too little for the desired progress. I found for our platoon that two to three hours a week, balanced across language training, terrain and area familiarization, and cross-cultural training was the right balance for our group.

Lastly, we learned it was especially beneficial to integrate as many mission-specific competencies into the training as possible. My platoon knew that part of our mission would be security-force patrols securing U.S. advisers, and our tactical patrols would likely partner with Afghan National Army forces. In light of that mission and the high insider-threat potential, we trained accordingly to mitigate our tactical risk and emphasized learning cultural norms, respect and behavior.

Are your Soldiers prepared?

By limiting our Soldiers to the fundamental fighting functions of marksmanship and squad attack, not only are we ignoring Army doctrine, but we also aren't giving our Soldiers enough credit – or enough of a challenge – intellectually. Consider this: many of your Soldiers could, on a moment's notice, sketch to-scale maps of several levels of the videogame "Call of Duty"; these same Soldiers are more than capable of conducting highly sophisticated analysis of the terrain on which they will fight. They just need to be challenged accordingly. The Army is and should remain in the business of manufacturing leaders at every level. Today's privates are tomorrow's squad leaders; no one is too junior to know the fundamentals of the theater in which they are risking their lives.

Time is not too short in the pre-deployment window already. To the platoon leader who feels constrained, consider Teddy Roosevelt's famous words: "Do what you can, with what you have, where you are."⁷ If all you can do is an informal class on the major cities in your area of operations two months before you deploy, great – that's better than nothing. If you have time for a more elaborate effort to educate your Soldiers on language, culture and geography, even better. But it is never too early to start.

Zabul School proved a worthwhile exercise that reaped big rewards for our platoon. It was far from perfect. In hindsight, I should have started earlier; I should have used a wider array of articles and videos; and I definitely should have worked harder to find primary sources with knowledge of Zabul. But even so, it was a learning exercise that moved us forward as a platoon, helped all of us improve our cross-cultural competencies and made us that much more prepared to win in the complex environment to which we deployed.

Just like training battle drills, cross-cultural training and learning to "know your turf" takes time and concentrated effort. As deployments shift from Afghanistan and Iraq to new areas of operations, the need for adaptive leaders who can hastily provide detailed analysis and innovative training in short timespans will only grow.

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Notes

¹ FM 3-07, *Stability*, June 2014; Department of the Army, *Insurgencies and Counterinsurgencies*, May 2014.

² Army Doctrinal Reference Publication 5-0, *The Operations Process*, May 2012; FM 3-21.0, *The Infantry Rifle Company*, July 2006.

³ *Insurgencies and Counterinsurgencies*.

⁴ David Kilcullen, "Twenty-Eight Articles," *Counterinsurgency*, 1 (2006).

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ U.S. Army Training and Doctrine Command Pamphlet 525-3-1, *The U.S. Army Operating Concept: Win in a Complex World*, October 2014.

⁷ Theodore Roosevelt, *An Autobiography*, New York: MacMillan, 1913.

Acronym Quick-Scan

ASAT – advanced situational-awareness training

ASCOPE – areas, structures, capabilities, organizations, people and events

COIN – counterinsurgency

FM – field manual

METT-TC – mission, enemy, terrain, troops available, time, civil considerations

NCO – noncommissioned officer

OACOK – observation and fields of fire, avenues of approach, key terrain, obstacles and movement, and cover and concealment

PMESII-PT – political, military, economic, social, information, infrastructure, physical environment and time

RC – regional command

RFI – request for information

RIP – relief in place