

# AN AMBUSH IN SHIGAL DISTRICT: *TACTICS AND TRIBAL DYNAMICS IN KUNAR PROVINCE*

CPT MICHAEL KOLTON

**O**n 20 June 2011, insurgents ambushed an Afghan National Army (ANA) company in the Shigal District of Kunar Province, Afghanistan. The ambush developed into an ANA battalion-level engagement with support from U.S. forces. Despite forcing the enemy to retreat, the battle resulted in one American killed in action (KIA), two Afghan KIA, and several ANA wounded in action (WIA). Two days later in the same district, U.S. and Afghan forces responded to time-sensitive intelligence and decisively counterattacked an insurgent ambush resulting in 14 enemy KIA and zero loss to coalition forces. Most importantly, the 22 June victory won the population's support with lasting effects for local security. On 20 June, Bravo Company and our Afghan partners experienced tragic losses; on 22 June, we won an invigorating victory.

None of these events matched Bravo Company's most intense, complex combat experiences, but they provide lessons for leaders partnered with indigenous forces. Moreover, the combat actions reveal an endearing perseverance among Soldiers and the direct benefit of strong community relationships in a counterinsurgency (COIN) environment.

From April 2011 until April 2012, Bravo Company, 2nd

Battalion, 27th Infantry Regiment, operated out of Combat Outpost (COP) Monti in Kunar Province. Bravo Company, in partnership with Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF), secured the population of Asmar, Dangam, and Shigal Districts in coordination with the local Afghan government and tribal elders in order to build an independent ANSF and increase the legitimacy of the Government of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan (GIROA). Historically, Asmar, Dangam, and Shigal had been administered under a single Asmar government. Thus, Bravo Company's three-district area of operations (AO) can be expediently called Asmar. Bravo Company intimately partnered with an ANA battalion, or kandak, with approximately 800 soldiers. The kandak headquarters (HQ) was located with Bravo Company's command post at COP Monti. Additionally, Bravo Company partnered with a 450-man Afghan Border Police (ABP) kandak, which was headquartered in a compound nearby. Bravo Company also advised three local district police forces. Without a Security Force Assistance Team (SFAT) to support us, our rifle company's NCOs and junior officers shouldered an astonishing share of a complex partnership mission in a particularly lethal environment.

In Kunar Province, the terrain is rugged and highly restricts

*A Soldier assigned to Company B, 2nd Battalion, 27th Infantry Regiment, pulls guard while watching storm clouds roll in near COP Monti in Kunar Province on 5 May 2011.*

Photo by SFC Mark Burrell





Photos courtesy of author

*Soldiers with 2nd Platoon, Bravo Company, 2nd Battalion, 27th Infantry Regiment, 3rd Brigade Combat Team, 25th Infantry Division, conduct combined zone reconnaissance with Afghan National Army soldiers in the Shigal District of Kunar Province, Afghanistan, in July 2011.*

maneuver. In Asmar, the Kunar River flows north to south, splitting the AO into east and west parts. This river significantly influenced local demography, politics, and enemy activity. Bravo Company's AO shared a 50 kilometer border with Pakistan, and insurgents readily infiltrated the region. Yet, the Kunar River provided a significant obstacle for enemy movement, and bridges were key terrain for their operations.

Our ANA partners were also new to Asmar. Their kandak had moved to COP Monti from another province four months prior to our arrival. Before this move, a single Afghan rifle company from a different kandak was the only ANSF maneuver force in the area. Thus, the ANA were still building initial relationships with a long-neglected local community. In our first two months of partnership, the ANA grew increasingly comfortable conducting independent reconnaissance patrols in a steady-state COIN environment.

Despite recognizable shortcomings, the kandak possessed many redeeming qualities. First, many of the men were tenacious fighters. They did not shirk from a fight. Afghan hesitation for unilateral actions came from reasonable misgivings about insufficient indirect fire support. Many ANA platoons had been together for three years and endured fierce fighting in Nangarhar, Kunar, and Nuristan provinces. They wanted to do well, and we quickly developed strong relationships at all levels. As we fought and patrolled together, our mutual trust grew.

In the beginning, we directed considerable effort towards building the kandak's command, control, and communication (C3) functions. They were very novice at maneuvering platoons

and companies. Officers struggled to use radios and give effective commands. No one was able to accurately track formations in real time. The battalion commander (who I will refer to as HG) adequately managed administration functions, but he could not maneuver companies or supervise a planning process. Similarly, company commanders poorly maneuvered platoons, and troop leading procedures were rarely followed. The kandak had good raw ingredients but needed considerable mentorship.

Americans must remember high-context cultures require firm relationships before commencing business. Too often, Army leaders rely on a projected concept of professionalism to drive effective partnered action with indigenous counterparts. At the tactical edge, effective partnerships rely substantially on personal relationships. In Afghanistan, you must first become friends before telling someone what to do. A paraphrased Kunari proverb: *If you take a Pashtun to heaven by force, he will fight you until his last breath, but if you make a Pashtun your friend, he will go with you to hell.* As American partners, we had to temper ambition and develop those critical bonds first.

Unless I was on patrol, I met with HG a minimum of four times daily. We had breakfast tea at 0900, lunch at 1200, kandak staff meetings at 1900, and evening tea at 2100. I also worked with the kandak operations officer in our combined tactical operations center (CTOC). The ANA had five maneuver companies, two of which were located at ANA COPs in Dangam and Shigal districts. Bravo Company was responsible for supporting more than 1,200 ANSF personnel and three underfunded district governments. If our critical tasks were numerous, supporting tasks were simply

overwhelming. In a commendably decentralized approach, the brigade and battalion allocated Bravo Company considerable resources. We had a four-man maintenance team to run a robust motor pool, and we had a forward aid station with a physician's assistant. We also had Army cooks to run a chow hall for three hot meals a day. Despite great enablers, Bravo Company remained a motorized rifle company with a tremendous workload.

A superb Infantry lieutenant led the eight-man company intelligence support team (CoIST) for the first three months of the deployment before leading one of Bravo Company's rifle platoons. The rest of the CoIST was poached from the line platoons. Two NCOs on their third deployment led six young Soldiers new to combat. Despite being green, the young Soldiers possessed unique talents. One Soldier boasted several years as an Ohio police officer with a passion for network analysis. The CoIST and I were organically joined, and I considered them my brain trust. From friendly network analysis to debrief collection to synthesizing targeting packets, the CoIST provided adaptive, accurate information for rapid decisions. The CoIST and I would sit multiple times each day and talk freely about the AO. Moreover, at least one CoIST rep accompanied me in meetings with locals and on patrol. Platoons also took CoIST reps on missions. During named operations, CoIST personnel manned vehicles for the first sergeant (1SG), executive officer (XO), and other HQ vehicles. They shared nearly every Bravo Company firefight with the rifle platoons. Thus, the CoIST remained respected combat Infantrymen connected to reality on the ground.

From the CTOC, the fire support officer (FSO) and his NCO coordinated all fire missions. Bravo Company had its organic mortar section with 120mm and 81mm mortars. Only direct-lay 60mm was under my approval, and all other missions required battalion coordination for airspace clearance and a collateral damage estimate (CDE). We also had access to a fire battery platoon with two 105mm howitzers in direct support. Again, I approved direct-lay fire missions. The fire direction center (FDC) was located in my CTOC immediately to the right of my FSO. To my FSO's left, my attached tactical air control party (TACP) manned their radios and a video up-link. The Air Force assigned Bravo Company a full-time joint terminal attack controller (JTAC) and his apprentice radio operator maintainer and driver (ROMAD). On almost all operations, the FSO, his RTO, and the JTAC traveled with me.

COP Monti housed a four-man brigade human collection team (HCT) to develop sources. My CoIST and I worked intimately with them, and they went on patrols at their discretion. Bravo Company also received occasional support from civil affairs and a military information support team (MIST).

Bravo Company had many assets, a diverse mission, and significant autonomy. Five distinct ANSF partners and three district governors required a lot of attention. My 1SG supervised our NCOs, mentored Afghan senior NCOs, and assisted the XO with the nightmare of American and Afghan logistics in Kunar.

Platoon leaders (PLs) received considerable autonomy to build

---

*Americans must remember high-context cultures require firm relationships before commencing business. Too often, Army leaders rely on a projected concept of professionalism to drive effective partnered action with indigenous counterparts. At the tactical edge, effective partnerships rely substantially on personal relationships.*

---

missions and develop pseudo-campaign plans for their assigned districts. For steady-state COIN operations, I designed a 12-month plan with a feasible endstate. Then, I issued three-month standing operation orders (OPORDs) with very specific and achievable objectives for each district to drive platoon plans. These OPORDs were updated as goals were reached or shortcomings identified. Notwithstanding my specified guidance, PLs and their NCOs had to grapple with the complexity of the overall purpose: building local government legitimacy in their assigned districts. For young leaders, such a nebulous purpose can prove intimidating. Their success in such a

complex, lethal COIN environment continues to impress me in reflection.

### **The Night of 20 June**

At 2200 on 20 June, I entered HG's office. I had just come from a meeting with 2nd Platoon. We had lost a Soldier that day — Bravo Company's first KIA. I yearned for work to bury the awfulness. Alone with my interpreter, HG lamented his failure as a commander. He had lost Soldiers before, but today was different. Today, he failed as a tactical commander.

The day had indeed been a debacle. Insurgents had ambushed an independent ANA company conducting a logistics patrol on the main supply route (MSR) 15 kilometers south of COP Monti. North of Farish Village, the insurgents' initial volley inflicted a near-catastrophic strike on the company commander's truck. With casualties trapped in a burning vehicle, the ANA were fixed in the kill zone. A fiery ANA platoon sergeant (PSG), reacting to a desperate situation, bravely led his men up a 500-foot bluff and routed the insurgents from their nearest and most deadly high-ground positions. Rather than retaining key terrain, the PSG aggressively pursued the retreating insurgents deeper into the mountains.

Cleverly, insurgents had prepared a reserve in subsequent battle positions with a solid defense in-depth. The aggressive ANA platoon overreached and fell into the insurgent trap. The enemy used machine gun fire and rocket-propelled grenades (RPGs) to fix the ANA in a draw between two ridgelines. Bravo Company and the kandak reinforced the ambushed ANA to retrieve the lost platoon. The ANA PSG was fatally wounded trying to rally his men's retrograde, and his senior squad leader was then killed doing the same in his stead.

When I arrived on the scene with 2nd Platoon and HG's tactical command post (TAC), three ANA companies were already spread across the mountains with zero command and control. At the battle's peak, four ANA companies were desperately trying to develop a coherent action. Along with close air support (CAS), I controlled scout weapons teams (SWTs — Kiowa helicopters) and attack weapons teams (AWTs — Apache helicopters) in support of a massive, disorderly ANA maneuver. The kandak lost all situational understanding, and reporting from various ANA elements was extremely poor. Meanwhile, insurgents patiently tightened their noose on the trapped ANA platoon.

HG grew exceedingly frustrated with the chaos. In desperation,



*This photograph was taken by a Soldier with Bravo Company, 2nd Battalion, 27th Infantry Regiment, during combined zone reconnaissance with Afghan National Army soldiers along a main supply route in Asmar District.*

he handed full operational control of the kandak to me and told me to save his battalion. Many moments from that day remain quite vivid in my memory, and that moment of leadership defeat continues to haunt me. Though we eventually rescued the ANA platoon, the day was too costly.

Hours after the battle, HG, an Afghan-American interpreter, and I sat together sharing unspoken sadness and disappointment. HG lamented his failure as a commander. Since he had already assessed his leadership failures, my constructive feedback was unnecessary that night.

We sat and sipped tea in quiet for a good while. HG broke the silence, “Take my kandak.”

I asked for clarification, “What do you mean, friend.”

“I have failed my battalion. I can no longer lead them. I don’t know how. From now on, this is your kandak. You saved my men; you climbed the mountain and got them out. You led them and got my men out. You did all of that. I could not figure out what to do; I froze, but you didn’t. You and your Soldiers did what I could not do.”

“Brother, we all made mistakes. The kandak has a lot of improvements to make, but we will make them together. I am not leaving for another 10 months. In three months, your kandak will be 10 times better than it was today. But, we need to train, and I need you. These are your men; you must teach them to persevere.”

“Whatever you say, we will do. Without you, we are all lost.” This gloomy line hit hard.

“Brother, together we will overcome this, but from now on I want be much more direct with you, ok? I am going to tell you how

to do a lot of things better. Before, I was quiet and let you do things your way. Now, I want to be more direct. I will always give advice in private, but I want you to let me be more direct. You know I do these things out of love, not disrespect.”

HG swore, “You are my brother. We will do this together just as you said.”

“Qadam peh Qadam.” Step-by-step was my mantra for the deployment. It kept my sanity and also reduced Afghan frustration with the seemingly insurmountable challenges in front of them.

Despite all our outreach to the community, the tribal elders in southern Shigal had failed us. They had not reported any enemy movement in the area before the attack. Their bystander negligence contradicted publicly made promises at previous jirgas to support the ANA. HG and I agreed

to host an emergency jirga the next day. We needed to exploit that day’s setback and seize the initiative in the valleys.

### **The Jirga as a Conduit for Change**

In Kunar, legitimacy is greatly built on local elder support. Cynically, some buy favor with earmarked projects or even plain bribery. In Asmar, relationships with power brokers come in two tiers. Relationships built on quid pro quo fade after the last payment is exchanged; money does not bind Pashtun honor. In contrast, profound relationships are slowly built on Afghan chivalry. If a Pashtun binds his honor to your fate, he will forfeit his life if necessary to protect it. Unlike Western society where such fidelity seems quixotic, tenacious Pashtuns adhere to such a code. Though distorted by centuries of foreign incursions, Kunar’s ancient warrior culture continues to live a code of yesteryear.

In Asmar, an Infantry company commander is neither an ambassador of America’s goodwill nor a colonial master. Kunari Pashtuns yearn for him to be a warrior. Yet, the Pashtun narrative describes many flavors of warrior leaders. Some tactical commanders mimic an authoritarian tribal elder; the unit constitutes the tribe. In this instance, guns and money define power, and such leaders enter the fray of local politics with an aggressive persona. This approach can quickly stir deep-seated resentment from former British and Soviet invasions.

In the valleys of Asmar, Americans using this approach assured disappointment. In a single day in the 1980s, local Mujahedeen fighters had annihilated an entire mechanized Soviet battalion near COP Monti. I spoke to Afghans who had served on both

sides of the Soviet conflict, and death toll estimates for Soviet forces was unanimously appalling (in excess of 300 KIA). Many bearded men in my jirgas had lost fathers, sons, mothers, and wives to aggressive fair-skinned men from faraway lands. To them, American firepower was impressive but routine and even somewhat despised as cowardice.

While warlords had brutishly governed local areas in other parts of Afghanistan, Asmar's tribes avoided domination under a single authority for centuries. Asmar's legacy cycled between collaboration and conflict. No single tribe fully controlled the area, and peace only occurred through consensus. When a tribe chose to bully the valley, other tribes built alliances to thwart their ambition. After generational cycles of violence, the local people had ordained a particular form of collaborative governance and damned all other approaches.

For Kunari Pashtuns, those who ruled with the sword were destined to face its edge. Kunar's Pashtuns are hard people with impressive grit. From the time they are born, death is an intimate part of life. Most children struggle to survive their first five years. Healthcare is primitive, and a minor illness can kill. When you meet a 60-year-old Kunari man, he is one of the finest examples of human survival. His family and clan are likewise tenacious. Such resilient people make terrific friends and terrible enemies.

In the highlands of the Hindu Kush, revenge remains an integral foundation of tribal law. In the short term, a strongman can subjugate valleys. Pashtuns appreciate strength, but they rarely respect it alone. Eventually, a strongman wrongs a rival and excites relentless passion for revenge. Blood feuds last generations, and dominion built with violence without a superior conciliatory architecture inevitably breeds feuds. Thus, a strongman breaches tribal dynamics at his peril.

To understand their culture, I had to understand Asmar's heroes, and Kunaris idealized the warrior-poet. He talks at barely audible volume, never yells, and rarely loses his temper. He listens more than he speaks. He writes poetry about his homeland, battle, and love. He is a devout Muslim, speaks in parables, and quotes the Prophet when explaining reasons for action. The Kunari hero respects women at all costs in peculiar ways that are unapologetically chauvinistic. The Kunari hero is a powerful fighter with extensive combat experience, but he does not brag about his exploits. Others attest to the hero's deeds, and their narratives act as historical record for local people. The Kunari hero is charitable without showmanship. A Kunari hero knows he is powerful and does not need to crow. Importantly, a Kunari hero offers reconciliation from a position of strength as a man of forgiveness vice a weak man desperate for allies. As a company commander in Asmar, I sought to emulate these characteristics whenever congruent with my professional ethic.

Pashtuns readily recognized the incredible power American company commanders control. I did not need to constantly remind elders of my power over "guns and butter." Most Pashtuns savor battlefield heroics, and many respect America's warriors. Though other international and non-governmental organizations work in Afghanistan's

valleys, U.S. forces rapidly execute infrastructure projects like no one else. My esoteric paradigm was to emulate someone who Pashtuns respect and support. I must be an American warrior-poet. I wanted them to see a man of strength working towards reconciliation, eager to listen to elders, respectful of Islam, and attentive to Pashtun culture. Once they became my friends, the old men would duly tell stories of American exploits, honor, strength, and courage in the valleys. No Taliban radio broadcast, pamphlet propaganda, or radical sermon could refute their testimony.

If Americans mistakenly offend tribal sensibilities, insurgents often intentionally ignore them. The derision between insurgent outsiders and Asmar's local communities illustrated a simmering struggle between imported, dogmatic Islam and ancient tribal culture. Young men with adolescent beards descended on isolated villages demanding patronage for their righteous mission. Often, these fighters coerced communities to do their will. At local mosques, they preached for village sons to redirect their allegiance from irrelevant grandfathers towards jihad.

The fighters showcased flashy weapons and genuine ruthlessness to intimidate the community. Yet, with these actions, insurgents humiliated elders, who had spent decades building a reputation among their people as their protector. Though insurgents rarely insulted the elders explicitly, their actions remained insolent. Their behavior gained safe havens but brittle loyalty. The majority of Asmar's communities saw insurgents as one of many foreign powers who had come, ruined, and left Afghanistan. The most effective psychological victory insurgents wielded in Asmar were lies about America's acts against Islam. If I changed perceptions arising from these falsehoods, my conduit to the community would open wide.

My first jirga in April 2011 was indicative of our long road. HG and I conferred the night before about talking points. The purpose of the meeting was to introduce the new American commander at COP Monti. All the old men who came were polite, but analysis revealed none were influential elders. The



*The author speaks at a formal Shigal Distrit jirga that was hosted by the district governor and had more than over a 100 elders from the Mamund and Shinwari tribes in attendance.*

guests were emissaries sent to reconnoiter the new Americans. The act was not an insult: I was not yet worthy of meeting top elders. This event revealed the tacit rank structure in Kunar's tribes. Those in the higher echelons do not meet junior elders as equals, and I was still a low-level elder. Throughout the deployment, power shifts within tribes were exposed at jirgas as an elder moved up in seating arrangements, which indicated a rise in stature. Likewise, I needed the community to promote me to sufficient levels of influence to be successful.

For Afghans, meeting with Americans is a gamble. In land of immense poverty, an elder's reputation is his greatest asset to bequeath posterity. The village looks to chief elders for safety, and the social contract between an elder and his people is precious. If an elder bets on the Americans at COP Monti, then he bets against the insurgency. Elders were wagering their entire family for generations, and many naturally sought to hedge against such a dire downside.

In Pashtun culture, the design of a meeting is crucial to the outcome. In my first month at COP Monti, Afghans persistently tried to seat me at the center of the back wall facing the entrance. In Pashtun culture, this seat is reserved for the most powerful person. Though I initially accepted the kindness, the arrangement sent the wrong message. There was a pervasive attitude in the valleys that American commanders were viceroys. Likely derivative from colonial rule and Afghan monarchies, Asmar's leaders were publicly deferential to American authority. Though such niceties appear sincere and beneficial, they reinforce a harmful dichotomy of outside ruler versus local subjects.

I was not a military governor sent from Kabul to collect tributes. I was not there to manipulate tribes against one another and dominate. I was there to support the people, build unity, and facilitate legitimate democratic government. Thus, the "colonial master" paradigm contradicted our mission. As in modern community policing, perceptions often determine reality, and changing perceptions translates to success on the ground. In Asmar, jirgas are the primary vehicle to influence perception and begin transformation.

I proposed that since government officials were the legitimate authority in the Asmar, they should be sitting at the head of the room. After a few pleasant debates, the Afghans acquiesced to my insistence. Not only did this impact the community's mindset, but self-perception changed among Afghan officials. With a simple seating change, district governors assumed a posture of authority. For years, Americans had dictated local governance and marginalized lackluster officials. Admittedly, district governments were dysfunctional and suffered tiresome corruption. Yet, if perception drives reality, then constructive displays of an empowered government can drive actual progress.

Often, Pashtuns cut deals with authorities behind closed doors to parry others doing the same. Naïve American commanders with budgets for infrastructure projects are prime targets for such mischief, and a new American arrival to Afghanistan is quickly besieged with such tactics. An American commander with good intentions is vulnerable to seemingly benign friendships with proactive Afghans (who usually speak the best English in the valley). These Afghans eventually draw the unwitting American into a web of alliances. Though the American is trying to provide maximum benefit for the community, these interlocutors adeptly direct American benevolence towards their family, clan, and

tribe. As a result, the American's friendly network narrows to a small cluster of locals. Before the first 90 days are complete, an American has been cornered to the exclusion of many other power players in the valley. The excluded elders gradually stop attending jirgas and passively support insurgent activity because they share no allegiance with America or Kabul. The commander serves the rest of the deployment without 75 percent of the population.

With book knowledge and tactical experience in Iraq, I knew enough to be cautious. In the end, the jirga proved the best conduit for transparency. Firstly, I made decisions with public group consensus from all tribes and Afghan officials. Privately, I always consulted my closest partner, HG. The focus on consensus building forced Asmar to work together, set priorities, and solve grievances. After several months, the Afghans grew comfortable leading their council, and I happily diminished my mediator role. Admittedly, the one-year deployment required significant tongue-biting; it is hard for an American officer not to interject and fix a problem.

At COP Monti, we held jirgas at least once a week. Typically, the guests arrived in the morning around 0900. HG and I greeted them at the gate and escorted them to the jirga room. The meeting began once everyone was seated in their proper place on the rug. We started with a Muslim prayer, and HG introduced the jirga's agenda. Starting from the lowest level, each power broker spoke in turn for roughly 10 minutes each. Despite my position in the seating chart, I normally spoke last. This contradiction to cultural norms was necessary because many decisions relied on American support (financial, operational, etc). My speech was a response to everyone's concerns.

After an hour of speeches, the stoicism immediately changed to humor. We all relaxed from the rigid cross-legged pose and leaned against the wall. ANA aides brought tea and soda for the guests. We bantered about life and less serious topics. Everyone laughed. Then, the ANA brought in a lunch of meat, bread, rice, fruit, and raw vegetables. After eating, we closed with a prayer. HG and I escorted guests to the gate of the compound for proper farewells. We had a mosque on COP Monti run by the ANA kandak's imam. Many guests went to midday prayers at COP Monti before heading home.

Unlike most meetings, the jirga after the Farish incident was in the afternoon. The time indicated a heightened degree of seriousness because we would not host the standard celebratory lunch. This approach is not offensive; it simply signals the jirga has specific purpose. Everyone in Asmar knows when someone meets with the ANA and Americans at COP Monti. If we invite a small group to an ordinary jirga in the morning, uninvited elders misinterpret their tribe's exclusion. Normal jirgas honor elders and add political chits. An afternoon jirga is understood in the valleys to be a business meeting without fanfare.

We met the elders at the gate and respectfully escorted them to the jirga room. One of them was a very senior elder of the Shinwari Tribe, and he spoke for everyone. The elders expressed their greatest condolences for our losses. They reported 11 insurgents were killed and six wounded in Farish. The report matched our low-level voice intercepts (LLVI) from the day before.

Though they did not concede culpability, the elders admitted a deep distrust for coalition forces. For years, the ANA and Americans promised to end the insurgency and failed. Now, their

villages were at the mercy of rampant banditry. Moreover, 2014 was a prevailing thought in their minds: Americans were looking for an exit, and the villages would be left to fend for themselves. The American withdrawal from Nuristan Province in 2010 foreshadowed Kunar's future.

Their fear was genuine, and support for Kabul meant a stand against the insurgents. To marginalize their legitimate concerns would be stupidly disrespectful. Their villages truly suffered the insurgency without much help from Kabul, and I appreciated their candor. For the first time in the deployment, our meeting was raw and stripped of phony minutiae. I could sense HG and the elders moving closer towards a constructive agreement.

To assuage their fears, HG and I reframed 2014's importance. With the "surge," ANA and American presence in Kunar was greater than ever before. In 2009, one American platoon and one ANA platoon occupied COP Monti. In 2011, an entire rifle company plus attachments was partnered with an entire ANA kandak. Their resentment at years of neglect was understandable but no longer valid. Times had changed, and the ANA was here to stay in force. Americans would leave behind a capable, powerful Afghan military.

The chief elder accepted our framework for future cooperation. They agreed the ambush brought dishonor to their people and apologized for our losses. Throughout the meeting, HG proposed all our talking points. At the end, I spoke briefly at HG's behest. I simply implored them to report insurgent activity to Afghan forces and that without their help, peace would never be achieved. I swore American support for the ANA and requested that elders intimately support HG. I dared them to test us — call us, report enemy movement, and let us prove our resolve. The meeting ended with many condolences and promises of future cooperation. Time would reveal the jirga's success.

### **The Elders Place their Bets**

Without conferring with 2nd Platoon, I removed them from the patrol schedule to allow time for grieving and preparation for 23 June's memorial service. The jirga had successfully distracted me from the loss. On the evening of the 21 June, 2nd Platoon's PL came to my office to back brief his patrol the next day, which had been approved a week prior. They planned to travel with 1st Coy (company) to recon a local clinic and conduct key leader engagements. I questioned their readiness to execute so soon. He stated his platoon had completed all coordination with ANA partners to include combined rehearsals. Their sense of duty was unsurprising; they were good Infantrymen. The PL's attitude was correct: we were not going home and had to continue the mission. I acquiesced to a firm request from a stalwart leader.

I met with each ANA company commander individually for tea throughout the late afternoon. The 3rd Coy commander was especially irate. He blamed the kandak commander for the loss of his men and said the incompetence of the kandak was a reflection of his leadership. This commander was the best Afghan company commander in the kandak, and his men truly respected him. I was sad to see him in such a state. He was venting frustration and grief, and he knew I understood the emotions. I gave him my own medicine: focus on the mission and learn from mistakes. We swore to work together and enhance our partnership.

Second Platoon left before dawn on a all-day patrol. An hour before midday prayers in the valleys, HG rushed into my office

with an interpreter. Animatedly, he yelled a stream of Pashtu.

"One of the elders is on the phone. He says insurgents are in the mountains in Shigal." HG shook his hands with enthusiasm, yelling Pashtu at me while cupping the cell phone.

I gently placed my hand on his shoulder, "Let's go to the CTOC." We walked across the hallway while he continued chatting excitedly on the phone.

HG relayed to me the insurgents' suspected location and said that the elder had watched them resupply their positions with a water and food.

I asked, "Has he seen any bombs placed in the road?" I was concerned for the growing trend in eastern Afghanistan of complex ambushes using large, buried homemade explosives.

HG shook his head, "No. There is nothing on his side of the river. The enemy is all on the opposite side in machine-gun positions."

In the CTOC, HG and I conferred with the elder on the phone. I gave HG additional questions to ask regarding the number of insurgents and types of weapons systems seen.

### **Developing the Situation**

While HG continued his phone conversation, I radioed 2nd Platoon's PL. The platoon was in a village about five kilometers north of the enemy. At this time, I had not decided on a course of action. Just two days prior, we had lost an American and two Afghans in a firefight with insurgents on the same road in the same district. Was today a trap? Could I trust the elder? Any offensive maneuver operation in this area required a deliberate operation with multiple platoons; the terrain east of the river was horrendous and under the control of several enemy groups. We had drafted brigade operations for the area, and they were waiting in eastern Afghanistan's lengthy docket of to-do lists.

Also, we would need fire support from the 155mm howitzers in our adjacent battalion to the south. Though we shared a very positive relationship with our sister battalion, the area's terrain hindered communications. Even with a 120mm mortar firing point (MFP) at 2nd Platoon's positions, we still required an FDC to coordinate airspace and CDE approvals. We had FBCB2 computer systems in every tactical vehicle for contingency communication. Unfortunately, FBCB2 was not an approved tool for call-for-fire missions. Consequently, Bravo Company would be wholly reliant on tactical satellite (TACSAT) or relay via 2nd Platoon to reach an FDC. Hogging a TACSAT channel for fire missions prevents other units from submitting emergency reports like medical evacuations. Thus, responsive fires on 22 June relied on rotary and fixed-wing aircraft.

In a hasty time-sensitive strike without the option to flank, we had to use attack by fire (ABF) to defeat the insurgents. The firepower-centric approach offered doubtful reward alongside a substantial risk. Yet, the elder was daring us to act. Were we bluffing when we promised to support the local people if they supported us? If we failed to act, would the elder ever call the ANA again? Would his village ever support the ANA? Tracing this COIN mindset, an information victory exceeded tactical outcomes. To win the population, we must prove our value to them. Was this the right time to assume tactical risk in COIN to win the people?

The PL from 2nd Platoon requested to recon the area of interest, but I told him to continue with his mission as we developed the situation. I did not want insurgents to realize they had been compromised. First Platoon was on quick reaction force (QRF)

duty (we always had a platoon in reserve as a QRF while the third platoon secured the COP). I called the 1SG and 1st Platoon's PSG to the CTOC.

Second Platoon was an excellent reconnaissance platform. For weeks, the platoon and their Afghan partners scoured the physical and human terrain in Shigal District. During daylight hours, Shigal's markets were filled with local people and surprising normalcy. After sunset, almost all civilians stayed indoors, but 2nd Platoon spent the night with the ANA using observation posts (OPs) and dismounted maneuver to interdict insurgent movements.

Their zone and area reconnaissance missions built a robust operating picture, which proved extremely helpful for a commander making decisions that day. Second Platoon's debriefs to the CoIST updated our Tactical Ground Reporting (TiGR) database with photos and detailed analysis of mounted and dismounted routes. The PL's rapport with the locals facilitated effective jirgas. The platoon's culturally literate approach enabled targeted projects in cooperation with local Afghan officials, tribal leaders, and civil society groups. For a junior officer and NCOs with little training in economic development, 2nd Platoon made considerable advances in just weeks.

HG concurred that 2nd Platoon and its Afghan partners were the target of the ambush; the enemy was hoping for them to travel further south. The insurgent commander was most likely an older leader known to be struggling to improve his stature with the insurgent groups in the area. His group was not involved in the Farish ambush, but I assessed that he may have smelled vulnerability in American and Afghan forces after our losses there. He was a weak tactical leader looking for an easy win to build prestige. HG agreed with my estimation.

Ten minutes after HG entered my office, I chose to assume tactical risk. First, we had to win the people. Second, this ambush was a hasty copycat of another group's success two days prior. The suspected enemy leader was a known weakling, and his tactics were elementary. If there was ever a time to assume risk, this was the enemy I wanted to fight. Lastly, the ANA needed a victory. My Soldiers were resilient professionals, but 3rd Coy was devastated from the loss of their favorite platoon sergeant. The 3rd Coy commander needed to be reinvigorated, and I asked HG to have 3rd Coy support the mission. Another company was responsible for the district, but they were already on a reconnaissance mission with 2nd Platoon. I whispered to HG, "dray yem company zaroot laree" (3rd Coy needs this). HG nodded in concurrence.

### **Making Our Move**

My XO, 1SG, FSO, JTAC, CoIST OIC, and 3rd Platoon's PL and PSG were all present for a formal order to 1st Platoon's PSG. I told him to conduct troop leading procedures (TLPs) and focus on rehearsals. It was 1145, and the enemy was not going anywhere until 1500. It would take 40 minutes to reach the target area so I allocated 45 minutes for TLPs, giving us plenty of time to move south without revealing our intent. If we went too fast, the enemy's informants would notice our conspicuous rush.

After issuing the company mission statement, I sat with 1st Platoon's PSG and gave him a concept and we adjusted some details together. I told him to develop a graphical target list worksheet for his fires plan. The CoIST had photos of the exact mountains from the point-of-view of a vehicle on the MSR. I wanted our Soldiers to rehearse the plan in detail so there was no hesitation once the engagement started. If the enemy had recoilless rifles, we needed to kill them after their first volley's signature exposed their positions.

I next sat with the 3rd Coy commander and HG to review the plan. After HG's approval, the 3rd Coy commander privately conferred with me in the CoIST room. I knew his character, and I knew he was not a coward; he was simply assessing risk. After a quiet, brotherly discussion, he affirmed my decision and left to meet 1st Platoon's PSG for combined rehearsals. Each vehicle commander had a panoramic photo of the mountains with targets and target reference points marked. It was as close to reality as a video game. Every gunner, truck commander, and key leader knew exactly how to identify the enemy and communicate their positions using the common graphics. Moreover, 1st Platoon's terrain and enemy analysis predicted with surprising accuracy the enemy's location of key weapon systems. Thus, rehearsed targets translated to responsive, lethal strikes in the firefight.

The SWTs arrived on station at 1230. After I gave them a long explanation of the situation, they were excited for the mission. They had not seen anything in the valleys as they flew north, but we all knew the enemy adeptly hid from helicopters. I asked them to recon our route to deny enemy IED emplacement. I then told 2nd Platoon the plan over the radio. After 20 June, they were rightfully eager to slay the enemy, but there was no time to pull them out of sector, conduct combined rehearsals with the ANA, and cross-level the TOW vehicle. Moreover, I needed someone to be an immediate reserve for casualty evacuation and reinforcement as well as a communications relay between the ambush site and COP Monti.

At 1245, we departed COP Monti. As we left, the HCT reported that their source had verified all our information. Just two days prior, our company and the ANA had experienced a lackluster day battling against insurgents entrenched on the high ground. Then, the enemy had the initiative while our response was amateurish



*An OH-58D Kiowa from the 82nd Combat Aviation Brigade flies over Bravo Company positions during a mission in Kunar Province, Afghanistan, in October 2011.*



and hasty. Now, we were on the offense, and we had taken the tactical pause to rehearse a plan and control the tempo. Hopefully, surprise was equally won.

Based on intelligence and terrain analysis, I gave the SWTs an eight-digit grid of a likely enemy position. Though the SWTs did not detect enemy movement, I asked them to drop a green smoke grenade. In my CTOC, HG was still on the phone with the elder. Watching from his village, the elder reported the smoke was 10 meters from the enemy's position. A few minutes later, HCT reported a confirmation from their source. The PSG's target worksheet was dead-on.

I wanted SWTs to have a full 45-minute station time when we reached the ambush site. I asked them to FARP (forward arming and refueling point — go reload ammo and fuel up) for a 1330 time-on-target.

With 3rd Coy in the lead, we departed COP Monti at a standard pace. Second platoon was well-positioned in vicinity of the Shigal District Center. I used TACSAT and FBCB2 to update battalion, but 2nd Platoon also eavesdropped on company net and relayed reports through their platoon net to COP Monti. At COP Monti, all reports were submitted via Internet relay chat software to battalion.

As we passed 2nd Platoon, I maintained communications with COP Monti. As we passed through Shigal Village, LLVI announced, "The Asmar Americans are coming, get ready." The signal intercept confirmed human intelligence and initiated enemy radio silence.

On cue a kilometer from the objective, 3rd Coy's vanguard accelerated and seized its traffic control point in the south without incident. First Platoon's lead section entered the area at 10

kilometers per hour. The platoon's formation and pace had been perfect, and the rear section was already in its battle position before the PSG's section crested the spur before the kill zone. SWTs, returning with 45 minutes of fuel, were less than one minute out over the horizon.

I was at the crest watching as the PSG ordered his section to floor it. They sped though the kill zone at 30 kilometers per hour. The sudden acceleration down the dip and through the kill zone surprised the enemy. The insurgents initiated their ambush with recoilless rifles, and I saw three impacts in the vicinity of the bridge behind the PSG's vehicle.

After the recoilless rifle fire, the enemy opened up with multiple medium and heavy machine guns. PKM and DShK rounds were striking the engagement area, but we were very well prepared. First Platoon's 2nd squad leader was in the TOW vehicle acquiring targets, and the SWTs were right on time. Comically, as our vehicles were lit up with enemy fire, I breathed a sigh of relief — we had synchronized assets perfectly.

The firefight was a solid 25 minutes of gunfire, but the fight was familiar to Bravo Company after two months in Kunar. We fired three TOW missiles with devastating effects. The MK47, an incredible upgrade to the MK19 automatic grenade launcher, had its own excellent optics and allowed accurate 40mm grenades. The enemy's plan had fallen apart, and their array of forces could only mass fires on the preplanned kill zone. Thus, the MK47 and TOW vehicle were relatively free to acquire and destroy. The rest of the formation used .50 caliber machine guns to neutralize the enemy. I controlled SWTs as a maneuver force, assaulting the enemy from above while coordinating necessary shift fires and

*An Infantryman assigned to Company B, 2nd Battalion, 27th Infantry Regiment, Task Force No Fear, 3rd Brigade Combat Team, 25th Infantry Division, scans for insurgent activity at an observation post outside of COP Monti on 5 May 2011.*

Photo by SFC Mark Burrell



cease fires from our vehicles.

From 1st Platoon's forward observer on the fires net, my FSO received additional grid locations and worked with the JTAC to develop refined grids. On company net, my FSO and 1st Platoon's PSG reported locations that enabled me to coordinate assets. The firefight was the most seamlessly controlled engagement we had ever been in. Our rehearsed plan was executed to the letter. As the firefight began to slow, fixed-wing CAS support arrived and dropped two bombs on enemy cave systems. The blasts hit just after I released the SWTs to FARP.

The TOW Improved Target Acquisition System (ITAS) allowed 1st Platoon's squad leader to verify effects. SWTs had expended all their ammunition. The two bomb drops had shaken the enemy, figuratively and literally. With the ITAS, we confirmed six insurgents KIA. The MK47, SWTs, and CAS engagements required more effects-based estimates.

For the next 20 minutes, we assessed the situation. Everyone in 1st Platoon had suffered machine gun fire, but the recoilless rifle fire remained thankfully inaccurate. The enemy was too disrupted to bracket their deadliest weapon.

The insurgents chose to reengage 20 minutes after the helicopters left. The enemy had readjusted their fires to be less oriented on the kill zone. The enemy was trying to match our ABF positions with their own. Fortunately, our optics proved supreme. Soldiers from 2nd Squad executed another TOW strike. Enemy recoilless rifle fire was now inching towards the TOW vehicle. The enemy was trying to disable our greatest weapon. The impacts crept as close as 50 meters. Although 1st Platoon readjusted positions when possible, they nonchalantly focused on engaging enemy targets. With more refined grids, we dropped another bomb on an enemy cave system across the river from the kill zone.

After 20 minutes, SWTs returned, and the enemy ceased fire as they came over the horizon. For 10 minutes, nothing happened. I told SWTs to save ammunition and just reconnoiter. The F-15 flying 15,000 feet overhead reported a grid to the enemy DShK. The position was on top of a mountain peak nearly impossible for us to see on the ground. The bunker was well outside the max effective range and angle of our weapons. Kunar's insurgents were adept at plunging fire from the high ground, and I was not surprised with today's tactic. We received approval for the bomb drop and waited for the F-15 pilot to complete data calculation. Once we cleared rotary from the airspace, he could come in hot.

The enemy had made no movement since the helicopters returned. So, the SWT pilot proposed a plan: "We will pull back over the horizon as though we are going to FARP and see if the enemy makes a move. Then, we will be inbound in 30 seconds."

Since we had a bomb stacked, SWTs could execute their plan while the plane dropped the bomb. Their feint would clear the airspace. When the SWTs departed south, the pilot released his bomb. The enemy, unable to detect the F-15 flying 15,000 feet above the clouds and its bomb descending upon them, opened fire. Two DShK rounds smacked the side of my vehicle in 30-second intervals. The DShK has a distinct crack, and we could hear the outgoing round reverberate in the valley. We stared at the mountain peak with anticipation. Just as the second DShK round echoed in the valley, a bomb leveled the bunker.

From the enemy's perspective, the bomb was god-like in responsiveness. The DShK had fired a measly two rounds in

a minute and was immediately destroyed. Suddenly, the enemy launched a barrage of machine-gun fire, but SWTs were back on station destroying targets. LLVI indicated an enemy retreat, and their gunfire ceased. In the gulch immediately across the river from my position, the enemy curiously released several canisters of white smoke: they were executing a textbook break-contact drill. Yet, for SWTs, the enemy's smoke simply marked their exfiltration route. SWTs expended all their ammunition into the enemy's withdrawal. Having well exhausted their authorized flight hours for the day, the SWTs returned to their base.

We remained on the objective for an hour to ensure our victory was clearly recognized in the valleys. Villagers slowly returned to the streets eager to witness the battle's aftermath. The ANA company commander was at my position, and people gaped at us joking on the road. We had taken a stand against the enemy in the area, and they witnessed our unmistakable victory. Soon, the elder called HG and reported that all enemy had fled. He reported that the other elders were ecstatic with the combined American-Afghan operation.

In a display of unabashed swagger, we deliberately withdrew slowly from the battlefield with our ANA partners in the lead. As we traveled back through Shigal Village, people in the market were giving "thumbs-up" to 3rd Coy. The ANA's confidence was on the mend and ready for the long fighting season. Reports indicated that 14 insurgents were killed and 11 were wounded.

### In Closing

The broader effects of 22 June were truly noticeable. IED reporting to the ANA in Shigal District reached 100 percent. After 22 June, all IED emplacements were reported to the ANA or local police and not a single IED was detonated on ANA or Americans. The victory on 22 June also began to heal the setback from 20 June. Afghans and Americans were understandably frustrated with the costly day. Yet, we had a long deployment remaining and a tough mission to accomplish. On 23 June, we held the memorial service for our fallen comrade and our Afghan brothers, and the reality of our loss remains indescribable. Though the loss was our first, it was not our last. Bravo Company had even more violent and complex fights later in the deployment. Nevertheless, 22 June marked a beginning of a renewed, robust ANA partnership. It marked a beginning of effective cooperation with the local population. It proved Afghan and American resolve to everyone in the valleys. Though 22 June was not the decisive point in Asmar's security battle, it marked the day Afghans and Americans seized the initiative to win the people and never let it go.

---

**CPT Michael Kolton** is a foreign area officer (FAO) currently studying Chinese-Mandarin at the Defense Language Institute. While an Infantry officer, CPT Kolton served as a platoon leader and company commander. He served as a platoon leader in the 2nd Brigade, 101st Airborne Division (Air Assault). In 2008 at Joint Security Station (JSS) Ghazaliya IV, Baghdad, he conducted counterinsurgency operations alongside Iraqi police, army, and Sons-of-Iraq. From May 2010 until July 2012, CPT Kolton commanded Bravo Company, 2nd Battalion, 27th Infantry Regiment, 3rd Brigade, 25th Infantry Division. From April 2011 to April 2012, Bravo Company partnered with Afghan National Security Forces in Kunar Province, Afghanistan. He holds a master's degree in economics from the University of Hawaii and a bachelor's degree in economics from the U.S. Military Academy at West Point, N.Y.

---