

CF-SOF INTEGRATION:

A PLATOON LEADER'S EXPERIENCES DURING VILLAGE STABILITY OPS

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Map — Ab Band District in Ghazni Province, Afghanistan

The successful integration of conventional forces (CF) with Special Operations Forces (SOF) units requires mutual respect, a shared understanding of each other's capabilities and limitations, and most importantly trust. While trust is vital to building a cohesive team, it is oftentimes the most difficult to achieve. Each unit brings a different level of experience and personality to the mission, and it becomes a leadership challenge to ensure these differences complement each other instead of create conflict. I was fortunate to experience just such a relationship while deployed to Afghanistan, which resulted in not only mission accomplishment but also in deterring what could have been a major green-on-blue incident.

In January 2014, I was deployed to Ghazni Province, Afghanistan, in support of Operation Enduring Freedom, serving as an Infantry rifle platoon leader assigned to Able Company, 1st Battalion, 41st Infantry Regiment, 3rd Brigade Combat Team, 1st Armored Division. My company's mission was to support U.S. Army Special Forces (SF) village stability operations (VSO) in Regional Command East. We had received this mission in the fall of 2013 and spent our rotation at the National Training Center at Fort Irwin, Calif., learning about VSO and how to integrate with SF teams.

The VSO mission was based on counterinsurgency doctrine, and many top officials believed this method would break the Taliban and bring stability to Afghanistan. The basic premise of VSO is to place U.S. forces, primarily SOF, into districts and villages where they live with the indigenous populations, thus bringing order and stability while routing insurgent forces. "VSO was designed to build the country from the bottom up. SF Soldiers realized that Afghanistan, in particular, has a very disjointed, village-centered government that has little trust in interaction with government at the national level," explained the commander of the operational detachment alpha (ODA) my platoon worked with during our deployment.

Following our battalion's NTC rotation, Able Company reorganized into four line platoons to better support our upcoming mission. Each platoon consisted of three cross functional teams (CFTs), with each CFT consisting of a standard line squad with an added machine-gun team, medic, forward observer, and mortarman. Some CFTs also

included a mechanic or cook depending on operational requirements. The theory was that these squads could be detached from the platoon and assigned to SF teams as needed. Many of the Soldiers in these CFTs would be needed to serve in non-traditional Infantry roles, and much cross training was necessary once we were on the ground.

In November 2013, I became platoon leader of 4th Platoon, the newly created platoon, and was given the task of building a cohesive team in less than two months before we were scheduled to deploy. Thankfully, my leadership allowed me to have a good deal of input when selecting Soldiers to fill the platoon's ranks, most importantly my platoon sergeant and squad leaders. Holiday block leave was fast approaching, and we had precious little time to ensure we were combat ready.

I had requested an NCO who had been a weapon's squad leader in a sister platoon in my former company as my platoon sergeant. Although he was only a staff sergeant, his experience, knowledge, and work ethic overshadowed those senior to him. As for squad leaders, I was able to pick the two best NCOs from my former platoon and a third, a staff sergeant from the same sister platoon. It took two weeks, but we were finally able to solidify our platoon and prepare for the task ahead. In December, I learned that my platoon was assigned to an ODA operating out of District Stability Platform (DSP) Ab Band, Ab Band District, Ghazni Province.

We arrived at Bagram Airfield in late January 2014, where we inprocessed and received more details about our mission. We anxiously awaited orders to DSP Ab Band. A week after arriving, we left Bagram and flew to DSP Ab Band where we linked up with our ODA counterparts. The platoon sergeant and I met with the team's commander and acting team sergeant as well as the platoon sergeant from the uplift platoon — the Infantry platoon currently supporting the ODA we were replacing. We received an orientation of the camp and were brought up to speed on current operations.

Originally, the ODA had been tasked with replacing another in Logar Province with an already well-established VSO program; however, three weeks prior to deployment, its mission changed to building a VSO program from scratch in Ab Band District. This would be a difficult undertaking given that there was little coalition presence in Ab Band and hadn't been in quite some time.

"We realized we would be doing the VSO mission from scratch since the 7th Group team we were replacing had just established the DSP a month prior to our arrival," the ODA commander said. Initially, the ODA focused on securing the district by aggressively patrolling and clearing areas in South Ab Band, a historic Taliban safe haven. Because of these efforts, they had made great strides in building "white space" — territory no longer influenced by the enemy. According to the commander, the goal was to disrupt Taliban operations prior to winter to allow the team to, "build governance and development while continuing to train ALP (Afghan local police)/AUP (Afghan uniformed police) in preparation for the next fighting season."

The ODAs lived on DSPs which were, in essence, small combat outposts in proximity to district centers, ALP stations, and the villages themselves. DSP Ab Band was situated near the Ab Band District Center, the AUP station, and the Afghan National Army Special Forces (ANASF) compound. The DSP also helped protect the Highway 1 corridor.

Throughout the winter and spring, my platoon worked closely with the ODA and served as drivers, gunners, and security personnel on all patrols. In addition to serving in combat roles, we were also required to perform many of the sustainment functions for the DSP, such as improving the force protection infrastructure, generator maintenance, and heavy machinery operation during aerial resupply drops. We even had one Soldier serve as the camp cook for a while.

Aside from villages near the DSP, Ab Band District and the surrounding area proved to be highly kinetic, and we were regularly involved in firefights and encountered varying improvised explosive devices (IEDs). The efforts of the ODA and 4th Platoon were focused on continuing to create white space while simultaneously training Afghan forces and helping to improve security for the upcoming presidential elections.

Our Afghan partner forces consisted of the ANASF, ALP, and AUP. The ANASF soldiers occupied a former medical clinic outside of and across the road from the DSP and carried M4s, M249 Squad Automatic Weapons (SAWs), M240Bs, and an assortment of other American weapons. They also had two light duty pick-up trucks and two high mobility multipurpose wheeled vehicles (HMMWVs). The ALP occupied several checkpoints throughout the district. The ALP force in Ab Band consisted of about 50 members who carried AK-47s and PKM light machine guns

and had several pickup trucks. Finally, the AUP had about 100 members spread between the district center and a checkpoint on Highway 1. Like the ALP, they carried AK47s, PKM machine guns, and several RPG-7s. They also had several pick-up trucks.

Although we were actively engaged in the VSO mission, it was no secret that DSP Ab Band would be closing soon. The current plan was for an incoming ODA to relieve the current ODA in Ab Band with the sole purpose of closing the camp and retrograding to FOB Ghazni. The political climate, combined with the fact that U.S. forces were leaving Ab Band District, began to create an atmosphere of unease between the Afghan forces and ourselves.

In early March, our partner ANASF team was replaced by another team. At first, its soldiers seemed eager to patrol and take the lead on operations. However, this quickly changed, and they became uncooperative and apathetic. We began receiving reports that they were bullying local shop keepers and even extorting them for money and goods. It was at this time that the ODA commander decided to request a counterintelligence contractor to fly to DSP Ab Band and polygraph the entire ANASF team. The test results showed that at least three Afghan soldiers, including the commander, failed when asked questions regarding whether they were sympathetic to or working with the Taliban. The ODA decided to start distancing us from the ANASF team while also ramping up retrograde operations and accelerating the base closure timeline.

In early April, I was working in the tactical operation center while a patrol was out to a village in our AO. Recently, we had coordinated with some village elders to continue construction on a school that was to be built adjacent to the district center and across the road from the ANASF compound. While the patrol was out, villagers were continuing work on the school. Around mid-afternoon, we observed a commotion on a surveillance camera at the school between the villagers and the ANASF soldiers. Two members of the ODA, including the team sergeant, went out to investigate. The AUP had also gone out to confront the ANASF soldiers, and there was a tense standoff and verbal altercation that took place between the two Afghan forces. When the team sergeant arrived, he asked the group what was going on. The elders stated that the ANASF soldiers were in the process of taking the construction materials from them, claiming ownership.

It was at this time that my only squad leader not on patrol began positioning the Soldiers we had left in increased force protection. One Soldier was put in the guard tower with the best view of the situation to provide overwatch.

"After getting a radio check with the TOC, 1LT Cross directed me to watch over the team sergeant for the ODA we were supporting. I saw him to my right, just outside our gate, standing next to the Afghan Local Police and Afghan National Army Special Forces commanders. It looked like there was a pretty heated discussion going on," he said.

The ODA team sergeant attempted to diffuse the situation, but one of the AUP soldiers drew his weapon. Thankfully, everyone remained calm and no shots were fired. Following the verbal altercation between the ANASF and AUP, both sides, in an effort to prove machismo, took up an aggressive defensive posture, establishing fighting positions with weapons aimed at one another.

Three of my Soldiers continued to watch as the entire situation unfolded. "I continued to pull security when I saw the ANASF soldiers come out of their compound, dressed in 'full battle rattle' and dragging every weapon system they had out with them," one said. "The AUP saw this and responded by bringing out every RPG and PKM they had and lining the roof with men."

The situation remained tense for roughly an hour, and given that we only had a squad-sized element left at the DSP, we decided it was best to continue to perform base defense procedures until the patrol returned.

Upon the patrol's return, the ODA commander determined something had to be done to prevent future incidents. With the approval of the SOTF commander, he decided that the ANASF team commander and team sergeant would be relieved of their positions and new leadership put in place. The next day, the SOTF-SE commander, along with the ANASF's higher headquarters' commander, flew to DSP Ab Band to replace the leadership. This action, however, only exacerbated an already tense relationship.

"The catalyst for tension was when I fired the ANASF ODA team leader and team sergeant... the ANASF ODA did not think I had the power and rapport with my chain of command to get them removed when they failed to do their job," said the ODA commander, reflecting on the situation.

Shortly after the ANASF change of command, we received the order that the DSP would not be handed over to

another U.S. ODA as initially planned, but, rather, we would close the site within a month. We switched our focus to retrograde operations and continued to pack non-mission critical systems. Over the next couple of weeks, convoys from FOB Ghazni and FOB Shank, as well as a day of dedicated CH-47 lift support, arrived to remove equipment. Our partner forces understood the situation and that the days of American logistical support were almost at an end. The ODA commander remembers the ANASF soldiers' reaction to the imminent closure of the DSP: "Once we broke the news to the ANASF, they immediately went into, 'how can I make a profit off this closure' mode. They asked me for fuel, trucks, TVs, video games, and anything else they could sell. My answer to all of those things was 'no.'"

By early April, most of the equipment had left DSP Ab Band. We planned to turn the little equipment that was left over to the AUP along with control of the DSP. The commander from the Afghan Army kandak operating in our AO had coordinated for a civilian fuel truck driver to come get the remaining fuel. The driver arrived in the morning and loaded his truck. While he was leaving the DSP, the ANASF stopped him outside of their compound and demanded a "tax" for him to leave. The truck driver refused and returned to the DSP. We were furious over the situation and agreed to escort the truck driver to the highway. I provided a squad of my Soldiers to serve as drivers and security while my platoon sergeant and I stayed to command and control the rest of our platoon and organize defense of the DSP. The truck driver was escorted to the highway; however, the ANASF team followed in their trucks to try and stop the fueler.

Once at the highway intersection, the ODA commander stopped the patrol providing escort, dismounted, and tried to talk to the ANASF soldiers and ask about the situation. It was at this time that an ANASF soldier pulled out an RPG and took aim at the ODA team leader. Out of reflex, one of my squad leaders, who was in the lead truck, raised his weapon to engage the RPG-wielding ANASF soldier but made the quick-thinking decision not to fire, which would have surely ended in an untold number of U.S. and Afghan casualties. The dismounted U.S. Soldiers were able to quickly get back into their vehicles and return to the DSP.

Prior to the patrol's return, we went to 100 percent security and base defense posture. We manned all guard towers and walls preparing for an imminent attack. Our Air Force combat controller immediately began coordinating for air support, and it was not long before we had two A-10s circling over head. The ANASF had returned and were also taking defensive positions with weapons oriented towards the DSP.

"All four towers were manned, and all remaining personnel who were not critical to TOC operations took positions along our perimeter wall," one Soldier said. "Squad leaders were moving around the inner perimeter checking positions, the 11Cs were setting up their 60mm mortars; this was accomplished with remarkable proficiency, and we were ready to defend or deter an attack within a matter of seconds."

Roughly an hour went by and the situation was just as tense as when it had started. The ANASF soldiers maintained an aggressive posture and would even point weapons in our direction. The ODA commander ordered that if one more ANASF weapon was pointed at us, we were to engage. Our combat controller had the A-10s conduct a show of force, flying as low as they could over the ANASF compound to deter them from making a decision they would regret. "Security and safety of all U.S. personnel was my main concern after this incident. That is the reason we immediately called in close air support and went to 100 percent security," the ODA commander said.

The Afghans slowly backed down and retreated inside to their compound. The Afghan kandak commander was alerted to the situation and, after several tense hours, arrived on scene to remove the ANASF team and leave his soldiers to secure the compound. We remained at high alert for the rest of the night while air support circled over head.

The commander of the Combined Joint Special Operations Task Force ordered DSP Ab Band to be closed the next day. The next day, an American convoy came to retrieve the last of our equipment. The DSP was signed over to the AUP, and the doors were shut.

Although this was an extremely tense and volatile situation, we were able to remain calm and avoid what would have certainly been an awful green-on-blue incident which would have had major negative consequences for the

U.S. mission in Afghanistan. However, we received the support we needed from higher echelons which understood the severity of the situation and acted decisively. In retrospect, the ODA commander believed that DSP Ab Band was a success. He said, "Bottom line is that no one on either side was hurt or killed. This situation did not become a national storyboard of a disaster. Actually, it was hailed as a successful way to deal with a bad situation... There is a time for killing and a time to show restraint. Acting out against the ANASF in that situation would have been a good tactical decision. It would have been a colossal failure strategically for both countries."

At the time this article was written, **CPT Ryan B. Cross** was attending the Maneuver Captain's Career Course at Fort Benning, Ga. He has served as an Infantry platoon leader in Charlie and Able Company, 1-41 IN, 3-1 AD as well as the executive officer for Foxtrot Company, 2nd Battalion, 54th Infantry Regiment, 199th Infantry Training Brigade. CPT Cross is a 2010 graduate of Norwich University where he earned a bachelor's degree in political science.