



Combat Outpost Construction in Afghanistan's Paktika Province

By Captain Nicholas O. Melin

A key tenet of successful counterinsurgency operations is the separation of the enemy from the local population. If insurgents are present in remote towns and villages, efforts to foster economic progress or build a representative government are consistently undermined. With space to operate, however, the local population can receive benefits from reconstruction, and the environment can be transformed to the point where insurgents can no longer find safe haven or sympathy.

Across Afghanistan in 2007, North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) Soldiers pushed out into insurgent safe havens, lived among the local population, and worked to create space for reforms to occur. Nowhere was this process more challenging and critical than on the rugged Afghanistan–Pakistan border. Mountainous terrain, a porous border, and safe havens combined to create an environment where insurgents enjoyed freedom of maneuver within a few kilometers of the border. From this area, rocket attacks were launched at coalition bases, and villages

were either abandoned or forced to support insurgent forces. Freedom of movement across the Pakistan border facilitated the supply and support of insurgent cells throughout eastern



HESCO Bastion Concertainer wall

and central Afghanistan, and the movement of groups of insurgents through critical mountain passes was not uncommon. The insurgents attempted to evade coalition patrols and move to safe havens and facilities hundreds of kilometers inside Afghanistan.

Mission

Team Bulldog from Bravo Company, 864th Engineer Battalion (Combat) (Heavy), out of Fort Lewis, Washington, received the mission to construct multiple combat outposts (COPs) near the Afghanistan–Pakistan border. The purpose of these bases was to interdict insurgent movement and separate the insurgents from local villages in the border region and larger population centers within Afghanistan. Partnered with the maneuver task force in the area—Task Force Eagle, 1-503d Parachute Infantry Regiment of the 173d Airborne Brigade Combat Team—Team Bulldog constructed three COPs during combined arms military operations. These COPs allow coalition forces in Paktika Province to control key insurgent avenues of movement and to interact more closely with the local population. An examination of the tactics, techniques, and procedures (TTP) used during one COP construction project reveals how combat heavy engineer units can integrate with maneuver forces and enhance their capabilities in austere areas of operation.

Planning and Preparation

In early July 2007, Task Force Pacemaker (864th Engineer Battalion) tasked Bravo Company to partner with Task Force Eagle in eastern Paktika Province on a plan to construct a COP between a key forward operating base (FOB) and the Pakistan border. Increasing rocket attacks on the FOB from the border region, as well as a number of border villages with interests in economic programs, made coalition presence near the border essential. Task Force Eagle planned to conduct a combined arms operation along the border, providing sufficient security to execute construction operations. Given the enemy threat in the area, the initial occupancy construction for the COP had to be completed within the mission's two-week time limit.

Team Bulldog was task-organized as a combined joint team, with infantry Soldiers to augment security at the construction site and Afghan National Army (ANA) engineers to work as full partners on the project. Planning for the operation began with Team Bulldog's attached survey team conducting an initial design—based on information provided by the maneuver task force—to order materials. Given the lag time for ordering and moving materials from the logistical support areas to an FOB, it was essential to start the process as quickly as possible. Also, early designs were executed through daily coordination and discussion with the



A Soldier from Bravo Company, 864th Engineer Battalion, Fort Lewis, Washington, nails the wall for a bunker at an outpost on an Afghanistan mountain.

maneuver task force, ensuring that the guard towers, living areas, and walls were designed to their specifications. At the same time, the construction officer in charge made estimates of the contracted equipment and labor support required to finish construction within the mission's time limit. Augmenting military construction equipment with local equipment and local workers increased the amount of work accomplished per day and prevented delays due to the breakdown of equipment.

Since the location for the COP was at the top of a 2,400-foot ridgeline covered with trees, it was necessary to conduct a topographic survey to determine the amount of usable area available and the amount of work that would be required to clear the ridge of vegetation. Despite being ambushed by insurgents with small arms and rocket-propelled grenades during the survey, the necessary information was collected. It was determined that the shape of the COP, initially designed as a triangle, would have to be adjusted to fit the constraints of the land. It would take at least two days to clear the ridgeline and shape the terrain to reduce the slope inside the COP to less than 5 percent.

Upon completion of the survey, the full scope of work was developed:

- Construct a combat trail from FOB Bermel—another facility in the eastern part of Paktika Province—to the COP.
- Clear the hilltop of trees in order to provide space for construction and fields of fire.
- Erect HESCO Bastion Concertainer® walls.
- Place a concertina wire perimeter with fields of fire cleared.
- Construct guard towers.
- Construct vehicle and living facilities.
- Construct weapons facilities.
- Construct helicopter landing facilities.

Throughout the last week of July, final preparations for movement on the mission began at FOB Orgun-E, outside the town of Orgune. To ensure that all required materials were on hand for each day of the construction plan, CONEX shipping containers were packed by day with the required materials. The small size of the site necessitated staggered deliveries of construction materials. Additionally, lumber was pre-cut and facilities were prefabricated wherever possible to speed on-site construction.

On 1 August, the construction team began continuous route construction from FOB Bermel toward the COP construction site. Since maneuver elements were already positioned forward of the construction site, it was determined that moving most of the construction element was tactically

sound. The route for the road to get to the construction site had to be cleared of trees, reshaped, and widened. Upon arrival at the construction site, tree-clearing and ground-shaping operations began as ANA engineers staged workers and construction materials at the base of the ridge. The infantry platoon also began preparing fighting positions at key points surrounding the construction site.

Construction started with clearing trees from the COP site, placing concertina wire, grading and leveling the site, and constructing the HESCO wall. Integration of local national contractors in the project made it necessary to search and secure local workers and conduct multiple logistical convoys to support their equipment and to move construction materials. The role of construction surveyors on-site was essential since constructing flat pads for guard towers and living areas on a site that sloped in two different directions was a significant challenge. To ensure that the interior of the COP could not be observed from nearby hilltops, it was determined that a portion of the site would have to be raised and stabilized with a HESCO retaining wall before construction of the main wall. Next, guard towers were constructed, after consulting with the maneuver commander who would take control of the COP. Construction of weapons facilities, vehicle facilities, and barracks areas and electrical wiring of the base all occurred during the last phase of the project.

Completing the entire project within the time limit necessitated multiple logistics packages (LOGPACs), as well as an aggressive security plan. Team Bulldog's attached infantry platoon led more than 20 LOGPAC convoys during the mission, shuttling materials and repair parts to the construction site. The attached infantry and ANA platoons also conducted dismounted patrols in the area of the jobsite. Security measures were necessary because insurgents launched three rocket and mortar attacks on the construction site during the mission, and one LOGPAC convoy was attacked with an improvised explosive device (IED). Despite these obstacles, Team Bulldog successfully completed the COP and returned to FOB Bermel.



A Soldier places a concertina wire perimeter.

Lessons Learned

During the construction of the one of the COPs, Team Bulldog developed a number of TTP that may be useful to units tasked to construct COPs in austere locations:




Engineers from Bravo Company, 864th Engineer Battalion, Fort Lewis, Washington, put up wall structures for a new bunker that will serve as an outpost in the middle of the mountains in eastern Afghanistan.

- Integrate early with the maneuver task force for planning the combined arms mission in order to identify logistical and security requirements, as well as control expectations for the construction effort.
- Initiate the design and material estimate for the project as soon as possible, checking all plans with the customer. Procuring materials and funding for large construction projects takes deliberate effort months before execution.
- Verify fields of fire for all guard towers before construction. Determine tactical requirements that impact the design process.
- Conduct a full topographic survey, if possible. This will reveal construction issues before movement is initiated.
- Ensure that surveyors are on-site during construction to resolve construction issues.
- Precut and pack materials by the day of construction to avoid having to sort materials on-site.
- Augment military equipment and labor with civilian equipment. Military equipment is required because civilian equipment can be unreliable if used exclusively. However, use of civilian equipment to accelerate production is necessary when executing missions with fixed suspense dates.
- Inspect all civilian equipment a week before movement to allow time for repairs. Planning for civilian contractor

integration into a combined arms mission must be deliberate and thorough to ensure that contractor delays do not affect mission accomplishment. Operations security requirements must also be considered.

Enduring Effects

The COP construction mission described in this article demonstrated that maneuver units can integrate construction engineer effects into their operational plan as part of a counterinsurgency campaign. If properly planned and synchronized with the maneuver task force, construction engineers can leverage their unique capabilities as a part of the counterinsurgency fight. A forward-positioned COP along the Pakistan border led to an immediate disruption of insurgent activity in the local area and caused a dramatic decrease in insurgent activity in the vicinity of FOB Bermel. With the ability to directly observe and control the border, Task Force Eagle made strides in separating the enemy from the local population. These effects were made possible by the efforts of combat heavy engineers. 

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