



Tactical Leader Lessons Learned in Afghanistan OPERATION ENDURING FREEDOM VIII

**Colonel
William B. Ostlund,
U.S. Army**

Colonel William B. Ostlund is the deputy commander for the 75th Ranger Regiment at Fort Benning, Georgia. He earned a B.S. from the University of Nebraska at Omaha and an M.A.L.D. from Tufts University in Boston, MA. Colonel Ostlund has served in a variety of command and staff positions in the United States, Korea, Europe, the Balkans, Iraq, and Afghanistan; most notably as commander of 2d Battalion (Airborne), 503d Infantry, in Vicenza, Italy, and Kunar Province, Afghanistan, during Operation Enduring Freedom VIII.

PHOTO: Camp Blessing, Monogai, District, Kunar Province Afghanistan, 1 November 2007. Looking towards the Korengal Valley. (ROCK staff photographer)

THE 2D BATTALION (Airborne), 503d Infantry Regiment, learned valuable lessons during its 11 months of train-up and 15 months conducting combat operations in support of foreign internal defense missions in Afghanistan.¹ Soldiers spent 90 percent of their time conducting nonlethal counterinsurgency (COIN) actions intended to train the Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF), connect the population to the Government of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan (GIROA), and improve the infrastructure throughout the area—a mere 10 percent of time was spent on lethal activity. This discussion relates the knowledge and experience gained.

Predeployment Training

The 2d Battalion (Airborne), 503d Infantry Regiment, the “Rock” of the 173d Airborne Brigade Combat Team, is stationed at Caserma Ederle in Vicenza, Italy. A scenic post in a beautiful country, Caserma Ederle has no military training areas. There is a six-lane marksmanship indoor range, a high school football field, and a brigade-size parade field. The closest training areas in Italy are three hours away, and inadequate. Eight hours away in Germany is the nearest useful place to train. These geographic realities forced Task Force Rock small-unit leaders with limited resources to use creative ways to train Soldiers. They used their imaginations and figured out “how to” train versus “why not” to train. They dealt with day-to-day training challenges locally while commanders and staff focused on designing and resourcing high-payoff, multi-echelon, scenario-driven training that was conducted in Germany.

The unit adopted a training framework from the 75th Ranger Regiment. Trainers focused on discipline and standards (ethics and Army values), mental and physical toughness, medical training, weapons proficiency,

battle and crew drills, and mobility. In training, the unit emphasized clear and honest communications; SAMs (safety, accountability, and maintenance); operations security; and morale and welfare.

Early in the predeployment training phase, the battalion mapped out the “battalion fight” and trained to it, but then modified the map after the predeployment site survey. Ultimately, the focus was on—

- Command and control.
- Intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance management.
- Fires integration and deconfliction.
- Medical evacuation.
- Emergency resupply.
- Information operations.
- Commanders Emergency Response Program (CERP) and targeting nonlethal aid.

The battalion further reviewed the Mission Essential Task List to identify essential battle tasks, collective tasks, and individual tasks. It was obvious that not every task could be resourced, trained, and retrained enough to ensure every Soldier met the “go” standard, but subject matter experts could be identified for each task and Soldiers could be made at least familiar with selected tasks.

The task force ultimately validated 16 weeks of scenario-driven and multi-echelon training objectives during the task force’s Joint Multinational Readiness Center Mission Readiness Exercise. The unit trained well on all requisite tasks and had no deficient areas of training. A secondary benefit of working through these training management challenges was the opportunity for leaders to realize that not all decisions will be right, but that indecision is crippling. This principle served the unit well when deployed, as decentralized decisions were continuously needed at the “speed of life.”

In February 2007, during live-fire training at Grafenwoher, Germany, after eight months of predeployment training and just three months before deploying, the task force was informed that there had been a change in plans and they would now deploy to Afghanistan instead of Iraq. Since the unit’s training focus was always on framework tasks and standards rather than location specific conditions, the task force’s transition was seamless. Training continued and confidence and competence increased.

...the task force was informed that there had been a change in plans and they would now deploy to Afghanistan instead of Iraq.

During this time, the unit arranged a predeployment site survey that entailed an organized leader development program led by 1-32 Infantry leaders. The task force left the predeployment site survey with a clear understanding that COIN in Afghanistan was more complex than a “clear, hold, and build” mission. Clearing the mountainous valleys was impossible, holding them was problematic, and building capacity was a long-term venture. Achievable objectives included:

- Separating insurgents from the population.
- Stabilizing the area of operations.
- Transforming the area of operations for economic revitalization.

These objectives formed the framework for the task force’s efforts.

Deployment Environment and Lines of Effort

In May 2007, Task Force Rock deployed to the remote, austere, undeveloped, and contested Kunar Province in Afghanistan, adjacent to Pakistan in the Hindu Kush mountains. The unit was deployed for nearly 15 months. During that time, Task Force Rock conducted 9,500 patrols and scores of named operations.

Soldiers in the task force Rock area of operations entered a full-spectrum COIN fight in a new brigade zone. Anti-Afghan forces were within a mile of every base, and, if left unmolested, they attacked Soldiers on firebases as they fought for relevancy while the Afghan National Security Forces and the Government of Islamic Republic of Afghanistan worked for legitimacy. The Task Force’s lethal fight thus entailed protecting at-risk coalition forces, Afghan security forces, the Afghan government, and Afghan infrastructure.

Nonlethal actions entailed developing self-reliance among the population and patiently progressing toward realistic development goals. Targeted

nonlethal efforts were initially rudimentary. Population-centric information operations (IO) were continuous, and these efforts significantly matured as the task force tried to influence both the population and the enemy. Task force leaders conducted scores of “key leader” engagements and *shuras* monthly—all with nested IO themes.

The task force identified four nested lines of effort:

- Security sector control.
- Governance.
- Economic development.
- Information operations.

To be effective, Task Force Rock collaborated with Afghan security forces, government officials, and the population. The result was a near tripling of the number of security forces in the task force’s area of operations. This influence was referred to as “SWAY-CON,” which became an acceptable term when working to coordinate effort. The task force quickly recognized that all units had to work outside of their Mission Essential Task List and all Soldiers had to work outside of their MOS. Officers and NCOs were required to be generalists and had to—

- Operate coordination centers.
- Supervise tactical operation centers and command posts.
- Direct effects cells.
- Mentor Afghan security forces and Afghan government leaders.
- Administer detention facilities.
- Manage intelligence fusion centers.
- Perform as managers and field ordering officers for CERP.
- Conduct inventories and investigations.
- Serve as mayors and force protection leads.

All companies were called upon to maneuver regardless of specialty or function. They all had to be capable of performing common Soldier skills and tasks and a host of specialized duties.

All companies were called upon to maneuver regardless of specialty or function.



An Afghan National Army platoon commander briefs members of the Afghan security forces and Task Force Rock on the Rock Tempest CONOP, Camp Joyce, Kunar Province, Afghanistan, 9 April 2008. Afghan security forces led several planning efforts and the execution of combined operations in Kunar.

U.S. Army, CPT Duane Mantel

Operating norms allowed Soldiers to maintain freedom of maneuver in four-vehicle convoys. Although the goal was four or more up-armored High Mobility Multipurpose Wheeled Vehicles (HMMWV), the minimum to move throughout the area was two up-armored HMMWVs with counter-improvised explosive device (IED) measures and crew-served weapons with two Afghan security force vehicles in the counter-IED bubble. Movements had to be coordinated, and all convoys made radio checks when entering an adjacent unit’s battle space. Ground assault convoys and combat logistics patrols stayed inside the range of organic indirect fire systems unless approved by the tactical operations center, in which case other assets were ideally apportioned to mitigate the lack of organic fires. Pre-combat checks and inspections under these conditions saved lives and validated the adage that what gets checked, gets done.

Task force and provincial reconstruction team (PRT) leaders understood risks, and their efforts continuously sought to mitigate those risks to the mission, force, and population. Soldiers conducted daily missions to protect bases, maintain their freedom of maneuver, and connect to the population. The task force and the PRT cooperated to build Afghan National Security Forces in depth, mentor the Afghan government, and build the infrastructure, which created employment for the local

population. Not all was perfect, and there were no absolutes—success in COIN required continuous thought and reassessment with no status quo.

In the Task Force Rock area of operations, the Soldiers inherited and maintained a synergistic relationship between the task force and the PRT. To address the lines of operation adequately, they divided the duties. Task Force Rock worked security, information operations, governance, and economic development from the local population to the provincial level. The PRT worked government, economic development, information operations, and security from the provincial level to the local population. Although efforts routinely crossed, identifying the two units' "areas of focus" covered the dividing lines of effort in detail so that both the local population and U.S. military leaders engaged each other effectively and consistently.

The task force sought to establish and maintain a secure environment, which required intelligence synchronization, Afghan security force partnership, Afghan security force-led operations, and a shared purpose of maintaining daily contact with the population and defeating the anti-Afghan forces.

The PRT took the lead in developing governance. They worked with provincial and district leaders and routinely sponsored village and tribal *shuras*. They diligently worked with the interagency and international community to support, assist, and improve the Afghan government institutions. They mentored the Afghan leaders to create and implement solutions to problems.

As the task force and PRT relationship matured, the realization that "perfection" is an enemy in COIN became apparent. Entities that sought perfect solutions sat paralyzed; those that created perfectly efficient systems refused to see the ineffectiveness at user level; those that sought perfectly equal solutions failed to understand equal is not equitable. COIN environments demand thoughtful, flexible, energetic leaders who consistently provide timely, adaptable solutions in lieu of time-intensive, perfect solutions. Both the task force and the PRT proactively worked to achieve mutually supporting solutions to the province's problems.

Nuances of Information Operations in Kunar

Information operations were critical to achieving lasting nonlethal effects. When an early and

Entities that sought perfect solutions sat paralyzed...

resounding tactical victory nearly turned to strategic defeat, Task Force Rock learned that it was not enough to just fight and win. To maintain a tactical victory, the nonlethal fight had to be planned and executed just as rigorously as the lethal fight. Early in the deployment, the task force realized that "We don't have to be right—we just have to be first, and not wrong." There is an enormous difference between being "right" and being "not wrong" in the IO environment. In Afghanistan, our sense of right and wrong and our perspectives differed from that of the local population. The task force quickly became adept at presenting a narrative tailored for our Afghan population. It turned every setback into a victory and every victory into an extended success.

Task Force Rock moved from reactive to proactive IO, then from enemy-centric to population-centric IO. The task force sought to defeat the enemy's efforts by—

- Anticipating and preempting the enemy's most likely IO course of action.



U.S. Army, SGM Jeffrey Koenig

Larry Legree, Kunar PRT commander, meets with Yaka China elders to discuss effects of operation ROCK Avalanche, Yaka China in Kunar Province, Afghanistan, 21 October 2007. Commander Legree explained the benefits of working with the Afghan government and supporting the Afghan National Security Forces as he heard their request for support.



DOD

Governor Zalmay with members of the province and national government discussed the way ahead with elders from throughout the province, 28 October 2007. Afghan National Police and Afghan National Army secured the *shura*.

- Anticipating and preempting the enemy’s most dangerous IO course of action.

- Leveraging Afghan security force and Afghan government leaders, the cultural advisor, and the media.

Themes were synchronized with the PRT and delivered by task force leadership and Afghan counterparts, thereby reinforcing consistent messaging throughout the task force area. Pashtunwali themes were familiar and conveniently used to target the population. Islam was not a taboo subject. Rather, it was understood, overtly respected, and used to convey messages to the population through key leader engagements with local *shuras*. Mullahs were routinely engaged—generally before Friday’s sermon—with nested themes and messages that were shared between both parties. Anti-Afghan forces’ missteps were highlighted against a Pashtunwali and or Islamic backdrop. Their many mistakes showed how the anti-Afghan forces’ actions were contrary to Pashtunwali and Islam. Information exploitation of these missteps served to undermine the anti-Afghan force’s relevance and to separate them from the population. Afghan security forces, the Afghan government, and the religious leaders overtly supported the international community’s efforts to encourage the democratically elected government of President Karzai. These themes were constantly in the media via radio, television, billboards, newspapers, and word of mouth on the street.

Nonlethal efforts require leaders to continuously and rigorously dominate the IO environment. All leaders have to be in the game, be alert, knowledge-

able, and willing to voice concerns—and many times this includes voicing concerns to a higher headquarters that does not understand the operational environment. The military has sought to embrace the media for decades to tell our Soldiers’ stories, but still some military leaders just do not “get it” and seek to isolate or shun the media. Everyone knows that the media will get their story, but how reporters obtain it reflects whether the military is able to have any influence. The final product resides with and is most influenced by the editor or producer. Regardless of effort, not all stories will be favorable, and obstructing the media can only have negative consequences.

Money and the Counterinsurgency

Separate but related is the U.S. government’s penchant for spending millions to oversee the spending of thousands. Dollars are nonlethal effects, metaphorical “bullets” in COIN for the CERP Projects and key leader engagements. Dollars were the most cost-effective tool available. The task force could expend millions in ordnance in an afternoon with no questions asked, but thousands of dollars in nonlethal effects

Nonlethal efforts require leaders to continuously and rigorously dominate the IO environment.

required answering many questions over many days, or even weeks. Faster is better—less restrictions are preferable. However, regardless of laborious requirements, leaders must figure out how to effectively target and resource nonlethal effects.

In David Kilcullen's recent release, *The Accidental Guerrilla*, he commented on his observations in Kunar Province:

The fact that Kunar has bucked the general trend seems largely to be the result of a consistent U.S. strategy of partnering with local communities to separate the insurgents from the people, bring tangible benefits of governance and development to the population, and help the population choose their own local leaders through elections. Road building has been a key part of that effort.²

Rules of Engagement

Rules of engagement are authorizations to legitimately use lethal force with proportionality and discrimination. They must be understood by everyone, as COIN presents tough calls. Understand that—

- Positive identification may mean reasonable certainty, not “beyond reasonable doubt.”
- Hostile intent, determined by the commander who is on the scene, may be based on an assessment of all facts and circumstances known. The commander may not only be authorized but also obligated to address the threat.
- Imminent threat may not mean an immediate threat.

Escalation of force is a deliberate process. Questionable incidents will occur, and they must be investigated. The population's concern over such incidents must be addressed, regardless. As Brigadier General John W. Nicholson, former commander of 3-10 Infantry, succinctly conveyed, “Afghan lives are hard and short, 30 years of war, life expectancy of 45, one in five of their children die before age five... They accept hardship, even death, as the will of God, but what they won't tolerate is injustice.”³

The Soldiers that live among the population are “the experts,” and they care more about the popu-



U.S. Army, CPT Duane Mantel

LTC William Ostlund (ROCK Commander) and an Afghan Border Police mentor conduct a review with Afghan National Army, Afghan Border Police, and Afghan National Police during Operation Stalking Wolf in Kunar Province, Afghanistan, 13 December 2007. Afghan National Security Forces lead with coalition support, and mentorship was the norm in Kunar Province.

lation than any others care—including the host-government leaders. The Soldiers are the ones who will live or die with that population. Those that live with the population know COIN is not an impatient man's game; most operations proceed like a glacial thaw, and not all platoon, company, or battalion areas thaw at the same speed. Persistence, patience, and presence are required in COIN.

Living and Working with the Population

Task Force Rock and the PRT instinctively understood that they should not rush to failure by allowing the fledgling Afghan National Security Forces or their government to suffer defeat. When living and working with the population, leaders have to continuously gauge partner capacity and identify, understand, and appreciate gaps. Lieutenant Colonel Chris Cavoli, former commander of 1-32 Infantry, advised coalition forces that they must sense when they are the problem and the most compelling reason that there is not stability in an area and then consider relocating to an area that requires coalition presence.⁴

The Soldiers that live among the population are “the experts,” and they care more about the population than any others...

Much emphasis is justifiably placed on making “cops.” Increasing their numbers, improving their quality, mentoring them, and partnering with them is critical, but cops (the Afghan security forces) are comparatively easy to produce in a country with high unemployment. More challenging are the other components required to have rule of law: courts and confinement. The dearth of courts and confinement facilities complicates targeting and interdicting anti-Afghan forces. A common understanding of guilt in a country without enforceable laws is challenging, and rule of law will only be tangentially resolved via solid Afghan security force partners. The lack of rule of law further forces the release of the “less bad,” which adversely affects the population’s perception of justice and the credibility of the Afghan security forces and the Afghan government.⁵

Leader Lessons and Principles

Some lessons are worth emphasizing here as principles. Leaders must know their units and their capabilities and the physical and human terrain in the area of operations. Commanders must support their subordinate commanders, and leaders must continuously seek to understand the operating environment. Commanders should be positioned where they can best influence the fight; when out of position, they must confidently trust and support their trained staff and subordinate leaders to fight the immediate battle during their absence. Leaders must circulate among the units on the battlefield; they must share risk to have credibility, but not be reckless in the process. The Rock command sergeant major and I generally traveled together by ground transportation five to six days per week, but looked at different things and talked to different Soldiers when at the firebases. While circulating, leaders should monitor discipline indicators, but be positive, respectful, and appreciative of the efforts of their subordinates. Senior leaders must monitor company commanders and first sergeants for fatigue. When in tough fights, communication calls to subordinates who are in the fire fight should be positive, encouraging, and offer assistance. Everything else can wait; the two assistant division commanders routinely demonstrated this positive leadership technique.

Applying Army leadership doctrine helped eliminate many Soldiers’ mental challenges. As the battalion prepared for their third deployment, open and

frank communication was the norm—something that was practiced by the two previous command teams. All Soldiers were to deploy, all would stay in the fight, and a very small but effective rear detachment would closely manage the wounded and those being chaptered from the Army. The company and battalion rear detachment and the greater Vicenza community provided invaluable support to families and deployed Soldiers. Holding the few criminals associated with the task force accountable to a very high standard served to curb illicit activity.

Soldier Conditions

Some of the realities of having “no infrastructure” are worth mentioning. Limited Class IV, barriers, power, hot and cold drinks or food—for months on end—meant our Soldiers had very little respite. They maintained an incredible operational tempo that cannot be understood by those who have not shared the same burdens. For 15 long months, the Soldiers of the Rock kept the enemy at bay. Battle Company’s platoons pulled out of the continuously contested Korengal Valley three separate times for rest and recovery. On these three to seven day breaks, units went to Camp Blessing, a small place that offered Soldiers better force protection. It had a 24-hour mess hall, laundry facilities, a gym, and morale, welfare, and recreation accommodations. Most notably, Camp Blessing housed the battalion-command sergeant major and operations sergeant major, both of whom had a vested personal interest in caring for their Soldiers. The other companies were able to self-recover and occasionally rotate to Camp Blessing or similar bases. As verified by the mental health professionals and Rock Soldiers, two echelons back is as far away as Soldiers need or desire to go from their unit combat outpost.

The brigade psychologist was a credible warrior first and a doctor second. He and the task force chaplain, also a first-rate warrior, circulated in the area of operations. They resided on platoon firebases for days at a time. Both were invaluable to maintaining maximum combat power forward. When the psychologist or chaplain recommended a Soldier rotate from a platoon firebase, which was comparatively rare and always accomplished through the chain of command, that Soldier was employed elsewhere within the task force and permitted to continue serving honorably by contributing to the task force efforts.

In the Final Analysis

Ultimately, the task force was involved in 1,100 enemy contacts. Those engagements required:

- 5,400 fire missions (expending 36,500 rounds).
- 3,800 aerial deliveries (bombs and gun runs).
- 23 Javelin anti-tank missiles.
- 108 TOW missiles.
- Hundreds of grenades thrown.

The enemy routinely engaged at the maximum effective range, but on at least five occasions were close enough to touch Americans. Twenty-six members of Task Force Rock gave their lives in Kunar Province. Other noteworthy Soldier statistics include:

- 143 wounded.
- Three nominated for the Medal of Honor.
- Two nominated for the Distinguished Service Cross (one awarded by the time of this publication).
- 25 Silver Stars awarded.
- 90 Bronze Star Medals with Valor awarded.
- Over 300 Army Commendation Medals with Valor awarded.

The Rock's experience leading up to their deployment and throughout the duration of the deployment was instructive if not unique. Divergent personalities came together and connected to train while building a cohesive team of families and fighters. Supporters at home ensured that the Soldiers of the Rock were remembered and recognized while they were deployed and again upon their return. The Rock was one of six battalions in the 173d ABCT and one of scores that served in Afghanistan during this period. The hope is that the lessons and ideas that were "hard learned" by Soldiers of the Rock can serve as a start point for others as knowledge and experience gained. *MR*



DOD

SSG Erich Phillips is awarded the Distinguished Service Cross in Vicenza, Italy, on 15 September 2008 for actions at the Ranch House, Waygul Valley, Nuristan Province, on 22 August 2007. SSG Phillips was subsequently awarded a Silver Star and Purple Heart for actions on 13 July 2008 at Wanat Vehicle Patrol Base, in Waygul Valley, Nuristan Province.

NOTES

1. U.S. Army Field Manual 7-15, *The Army Universal Task List*, Army Regulation 8.3.2.3, Washington DC, Headquarters, Department of the Army, 31 August 2003, 8-15.
2. David Kilcullen, *The Accidental Guerrilla* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 71.
3. BG John W. Nicholson articulated this observation during a conversation in Kandahar, Afghanistan, on 6 February 2009.
4. LTC Chris Cavoli provided this guidance during a predeployment site survey conversation while we were traveling in a ground assault convoy along the Pech River Road in Kunar Province, Afghanistan, 15 March 2006.
5. This is my personal experience after 15 months of duty in Afghanistan. Task Force Rock increased the number of available security forces (Afghan National Army, Afghan National Police, and Afghan Border Police) from a force of less than 1,000 to 2,604 trained, uniformed, positioned, and partnered security personnel in Kunar Province. What was absent were courts and confinement facilities.

CALL FOR PAPERS

Military Review is seeking quality articles on—

***Adaptive and Agile Leaders* for November-December 2009**

***Forging a Comprehensive Approach—Defense, Diplomacy, Development* for January-February 2010**

***Fostering a Culture of Engagement with Governments, Media, and Academia* for March-April 2010**

See the *Military Review* website at <http://militaryreview.army.mil> for more details on how to submit articles for consideration.