Regions in Transition

The Maneuver Enhancement Brigade's Role in Counterinsurgency

By Colonel Scott A. Spellmon

My introduction to the maneuver enhancement brigade (MEB) occurred when I assumed command of the 1st MEB more than fifteen months ago. Looking across the parade field that morning, I began to understand the intent for this new organization as the engineer, military police, chemical, and brigade support battalions assembled under one of the Army's new, multifunctional support brigade headquarters, task-organized to perform protection, mobility, and stability tasks in a division or corps support area. While there is much in the Army's modularity concepts and new doctrine that I have yet to fully grasp, I learned over the course of my recent deployment that the MEB has much potential to play an important role in today's counterinsurgency (COIN) campaigns in Afghanistan and Iraq.

There is a growing recognition among our senior civilian and military leaders that improving infrastructure, local economies, indigenous security forces, and local governments is just as important in COIN as offensive, lethal, direct-action operations. From my experiences in both theaters, I have seen many cases where the nonlethal tasks are even more critical to securing populations and achieving stable peace.

After years of hard work, there are regions in Afghanistan and Iraq today that are moving left on the spectrum of conflict—from insurgency to unstable peace, and from unstable to stable peace. The combat power of a brigade combat team (BCT) may not be required in those areas, or even desirable. The MEB—with its robust engineering, military police, and effects staff—offers planners another viable option for a brigade-level command and control (C2) headquarters that is capable of integrating joint, combined, and interagency capabilities necessary for regions that are not yet ready for full transition to civilian control.

The intent of this article is to highlight the 1st MEB/Task Force Warrior experiences in Afghanistan, assigned as the brigade headquarters and operational environment owner for a region in transition.

Northern Gate to Kabul

During numerous conflicts and regimes across Central Asia, Kabul has held strategic importance as the seat of Afghan government. Our area of responsibility—the provinces of Bamyan, Panjshir, Kapisa, and Parwan—has often been called the "Northern Gate" to Kabul. Through these provinces pass the major economic, political, and military lines that connect central Afghanistan to the northern markets of Mazar-e-Sharif and the country's northern neighbors. The region has a population of approximately 1.7 million, including the largely

homogeneous Hazaran population of Bamyan, the Tajik of Panjshir, and the divided Tajik/Pashtu communities in Kapisa and Parwan. The terrain throughout the area is incredibly challenging. Our Soldiers, Airmen, and Marines operate from elevations of 4,500 feet at Bagram all the way up to 11,000 feet in western Bamyan and strategic points in northern Parwan. The infrastructure throughout the region is poor, but is slowly improving due to the dedicated work of many provincial reconstruction teams (PRTs) over the past seven years.

There are 31 political districts that comprise the four provinces. Placed on the spectrum of conflict, four would be to the far right in active insurgency, seven would fall in the unstable peace category, and the remaining twenty are just beginning to experience stable peace. I believe that this threat environment does not require the combat power found in our modularized BCTs. However, I would argue that a brigade-level organization is still required to continue the integration of the joint, combined, and interagency functions necessary to move these districts even further to the left on the spectrum and enable their full transition to civilian control and self-sufficiency. The MEB is a good fit for this COIN environment. Its headquarters has the staff expertise necessary to plan and provide C2 for the restoration of infrastructure, development of security forces, improvement of local governance capacity, and the many other tasks that help an indigenous government to stand on its own.

Organization and Mission

The 1st MEB did not deploy to Afghanistan with its organic home-station structure, but the headquarters did perform many of its intended doctrinal functions as outlined in Field Manual 3-90.31, *Maneuver Enhancement Brigade Operations*. As one of five ground brigades assigned to the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) Regional Command–East, the major subordinate commands of Task Force Warrior included—

- Two maneuver battalion task forces.
- A United States Air Force expeditionary security forces squadron.
- Three PRTs.
- An agribusiness development team.
- A human terrain team.
- A military police company.
- A signal company.
- An Air Force Prime Base Engineer Emergency Force (BEEF) detachment and facility engineer team.
- Afghan National Army (ANA) embedded training teams and police mentoring teams.

The task force headquarters also maintained interagency representation with the United States Public Health Service, the United States Army Corps of Engineers, and advisors from the United States State Department and the United States Agency for International Development (USAID). In all our operations, we partnered with an ANA brigade, the Afghan National Police (ANP), and ISAF special operations forces. Broadly speaking, the mission of Task Force Warrior was to help the Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF) secure the people of our assigned region so that the provincial- and district-level governments could exercise and extend their authority.

Lines of Operation

To accomplish this mission with our many partners, we developed a COIN campaign across four lines of operation (LOOs): security, development, governance, and information. We reorganized a portion of the task force staff during our predeployment training to synchronize our efforts in each of these areas and maximize their combined effects. Although there is much work yet to accomplish in each of the provinces, we experienced significant progress as a direct result of the unique organization and skill sets of the MEB headquarters.

In the security LOO, Task Force Warrior conducted more than 50 battalion- and company-level offensive combat operations, including 10 air assault missions. All of these were combined operations with our Afghan partners, designed to disrupt known insurgent networks in our four most unstable districts. These were "limited offensive operations" for the brigade in the doctrinal sense, but in effect, each was a major operation for the task force. The complexity of operating on Afghanistan's isolated terrain, working at the tactical level with joint and coalition partners, and the synchronization requirements for general support enablers such as aviation; intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (ISR) platforms; and close air support brought significant brigade-level C2 requirements for every offensive mission.

Just as important as disrupting insurgent networks was the need to simultaneously develop the capacity of our ANA and ANP partners. Without a brigade-level transition team, we formed an ANSF cell from the military police operations staff to accomplish this critical task. This team worked daily to coordinate and recommend priorities for the limited resources of our operationally controlled police mentoring teams and ANA embedded training teams. This staff cell also synchronized our efforts with several contractors supporting the State Department's Bureau of International Narcotics and Law Enforcement Affairs programs. Tangible effects of this effort included improved ANSF performance across many districts, as well as an incident-free voter registration period in each of the four provinces.

In the development LOO, our focus centered on road construction. While the battalions and PRTs did exceptional work across many economic sectors—including the development of new schools, medical clinics, and irrigation systems—the brigade took a regional approach with an expansive road development program. Roads are the No. 1 priority for each of the provincial governors, and we realized early

Building roads with local manual labor served multiple COIN objectives in each of the provinces.

in the deployment that improved road networks would better connect the Afghan people to their government, natural resources, and markets. The planning, budgeting, and inspection requirements for the road projects also served as a vehicle to improve the technical capacity of the provincial staffs. This effort was led by our civil-military affairs and engineer operations cells. With a generous budget from the Commander's Emergency Response Program, the brigade staff worked with the Afghan Ministry of Public Works to complete more than 280 kilometers of asphalted roads built to Afghanistan's national highway standard. These road systems will serve as the foundation for future economic development throughout the Northern Gate region.

Governance proved to be the most challenging of the four LOOs and remains so today. Throughout many meetings with the provincial governors and deputy ministers, a common trend we found across each of the provinces was a lack of ability in the staffs to perform the day-to-day functions expected of the provincial and district governments—to provide security, prioritize needs, and distribute resources. Host nation technical advisors contracted by USAID made significant strides in select government offices and proved to be of great assistance to battalion and PRT commanders.

At the brigade level, one of our principal governance efforts was working to improve Afghan rule-of-law capacity. In our assessment, the rule of law serves as the foundation for the government's ability to provide security and distribute resources. Our task force judge advocate led this effort, hired a number of local national attorneys, and developed a series of programs to reestablish rule-of-law services. In addition to the construction of district-level courts and other judicial facilities, this team partnered with our ANSF cell and conducted in-depth training in our most troubled districts to improve the efficacy of the Afghan security, judicial, and penal institutions.

Finally, the task force worked diligently to tie together all the LOOs with a nested information campaign. Most Afghans in our region obtained their news and information from the radio. Our provinces were served by five radio stations where we and our Afghan counterparts regularly attempted to highlight the significant progress being made in security, development, and local governance. Other methods of connecting with the population were used, including the traditional *shuras*, where we and our Afghan government counterparts met with large groups of citizens to hear their needs and demands.

Organizational Challenges

While I have claimed that the MEB is a good fit for this COIN environment, two additions to the current structure could make the brigade significantly more capable. First, the MEB needs organic ISR capability. Whether employed as an operational environment owner in a Stage 2 or Stage 3 COIN operation, or in a division or corps support area, the MEB commander needs the capability to see the enemy through each of our intelligence disciplines. Depending on general support coverage from the limited assets of the division or battlefield surveillance brigade is not sufficient. Secondly, the MEB needs a small staff cell of trained information operations specialists. As our doctrine suggests, information operations are often the decisive line of effort, and the MEB requires a cadre of these specialists to succeed in any mission set.

Conclusion

Today, my peers often ask a number of good questions concerning the MEB:

- What is the purpose of the organization?
- Why are the engineer, military police, and chemical battalions organized under this headquarters when there are already functional brigades in the force?
- What do these branches have to do with each other on the battlefield?

These are all valid questions and ones that I admit I'm not fully qualified to answer. But, having fought with the brigade for the past 15 months in a difficult COIN campaign, I can state that this organization has an important role to fulfill today in Afghanistan and Iraq. Whether by design or happenstance, the integration of engineers; military police; chemical, biological, radiological, nuclear, and high-yield explosive (CBRNE); civil affairs; and other combat support specialists under one headquarters brings exactly the right mix of skills needed to conduct COIN operations in regions that are transitioning from insurgency to peace. As we progress in both theaters and look to transition our combat forces with other formations that can continue progress toward our operational and strategic objectives, planners must consider the MEB as a viable C2 option.

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"Background," continued from page 10)

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[7]Author's discussion with Colonel John Peabody. (See also "3d Infantry Division After-Action Review, Operation Iraqi Freedom, Engineer," United States Army Combined Arms Center, Fort Leavenworth, Kansas, 2003, Chapter 15.)

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