



Success in Partnership

By Captain Mark D. Gillman

For any route clearance company or maneuver unit that will partner with a foreign army unit, we offer our strategy and lessons learned, build a relationship of trust, create consistency, and demand progress toward

self-sufficiency. This article describes how A Company, 4th Brigade Special Troops Battalion, 4th Brigade Combat Team, 101st Airborne Division, built on these pillars to form what was called “the most successful partnership in Afghanistan.”



Background

The roads in Paktika Province are mostly unpaved, unimproved, and laden with improvised explosive devices (IEDs). These devices serve as a powerful deterrent to travel by military vehicles. This explains the need for route clearance packages, specially equipped combat engineer platoons trained to find and neutralize these explosive obstacles.

After 5 months of route clearance operations in Paktika, our company mission changed to one of partnership. The primary task was to train the route clearance company (RCC) of the 2d Brigade, 203d Corps of the Afghan National Army (ANA). With little more information than an address in Kabul where

U.S. junior leaders conduct gunnery with their ANA counterparts. Partnership at the lowest levels contributed to the success of the team.



One of the explosive ordnance disposal teams embedded in each ANA route clearance platoon takes part in an IED removal exercise.

the ANA unit basic course was underway and the simple guidance to “train the ANA,” we began our preparations.

We first conducted a leader’s reconnaissance that included the commander, first sergeant, squad leaders from our two route clearance packages, and an interpreter. We visited the soldiers of the RCC two weeks before their graduation, observed their training, met with their commander, inspected their equipment, and quizzed the contracted trainers on their curriculum. We learned that there is already a decent draft field manual (also available in the Dari language) that describes the training methodology, task organization, equipment, and primary duties of an RCC. It provides the trainers, partners, and ANA leaders a common understanding of what to expect. The trainers are excellent, have relevant experience with IEDs in Afghanistan, and operate a finely articulated, 14-week training schedule. We also learned that their equipment included M1151 advanced armament carriers, Panama City mine roller systems, and dismantled metal detectors. Finally, we learned that there were still many issues to address before the new unit would be mission-ready. We gathered enough information to determine that we would build a relationship of trust and consistency and promote self-sufficiency from the very start.

Building Trust

Trust underpins partnership. By providing their life support, getting to know them as people, and being honest and direct about issues, we gained the trust of

the ANA soldiers and, thus, their loyalty on the battlefield. Soldiers moving to a new place worry about where they will sleep, what they will eat, and what amenities will be available. When the RCC soldiers moved into their containerized quarters at Forward Operating Base Sharana, their fears abated. Our entire company greeted them at the gates of their new home on the day they arrived. Being colocated with their U.S. partners, they had a lifeline when problems arose, whether plumbing, electrical, or medical. That first day, we declared that we would help them get settled, train them as best we could, and fight alongside them as brothers. Our assistance made them willing and able to go on missions with us from the very first week.

We also took the time to get to know them as people. It is not only Afghan soldiers who are skeptical about working with foreign armies; U.S. Soldiers also have questions about missions and how much to trust the foreign soldiers. It was important to dissolve some of these barriers, so we held a barbecue the first week and invited every interpreter we could find. The members of both armies met, talked, threw a football around, and let their guard down a bit. We also enrolled every RCC soldier into our biometric system. This helped them get badges for easy access to our base and helped us develop a picture book. The book, organized by platoons and vehicle crews, helped Soldiers remember who everyone was and endeared us to our Afghan partners when we called them by name. We also learned their calendar system and coordinated all missions based on the Afghan solar



Combined clearance formations included an interpreter with a headset to relay information.

calendar rather than forcing them to adjust to our system. (It is currently the year 1390 on that calendar.) Finally, we were sensitive to their faith, accommodating their prayer times even when on patrol. Their commander later told us that the most disparaging lies spread by the insurgents about Americans was that we did not allow ANA soldiers to practice their religion. When this proved untrue, we won over many whose loyalty had been divided.

Knowing their names, respecting their customs, and showing support opened the door for honest communication. U.S. Soldiers worried about getting shot in the back because of numerous similar incidents around the country. The ANA soldiers worried that the Americans would abandon them in a firefight because of earlier experiences with other U.S. partners. They also questioned why we would withhold our seemingly limitless assets from them when we knew that they had no support—including vehicle maintenance, fuel, and other necessities—from their higher headquarters. We discussed these and other issues openly and directly to try to understand each other. While we could not always resolve issues immediately, we reduced the friction by talking about them rather than ignoring them. Because we had trust, we could look past these issues and continue doing missions together as a team.

Striving for Consistency

Our second focus was to strive for consistency in task organization, attitude, and battle rhythm. We hoped to avoid the plight of RCCs deployed elsewhere in the country, many of which had been turned to other purposes. Some were dismantled and turned into personal security detachments for Afghan generals, some were designated as gate guards or warm bodies to fill details at headquarters,

and others had devolved into single platoons rather than companies because so many assigned soldiers were absent without leave, tasked out, or on leave. We started with three RCC platoons and were determined to keep them all functioning as such. The key was to keep their platoon organization intact, maintaining ANA leadership of ANA soldiers. By building habitual relationships between platoons and combining U.S. and ANA platoons into teams, members got to know their counterparts. It also clarified who would be going on which missions.

We learned from the civilian trainers in Kabul how important consistency is in Afghan culture. We took our cue from the trainers, who kept the same cadre teams with the same classes for the duration of the course and made daily schedules predictable. When the RCC deployed from Kabul to Forward Operating Base Sharana, several of the same U.S. Soldiers who had performed the earlier leaders' reconnaissance escorted the ANA soldiers to their new quarters. "Leo," one of the trainers from Kabul, lived with our unit for a few weeks to further ease the transition. His relationship with the ANA gave him the credibility to explain to them some things about the U.S. Army. Leo was also able to describe some of the key personalities and dynamics of the RCC to us and mentor us on cultural dos and don'ts. His presence during the formative weeks of our partnership set us up for success.

Establishing a Battle Rhythm

Establishing a good battle rhythm also helped. One example was the after action review conducted immediately following every mission. It became an opportunity for each side to reflect, ask questions and, sometimes, vent after stressful patrols. To improve their



Afghan route clearance equipment

everything they required. This paperwork represented the Afghans doing all they could do to help themselves. We also spent a lot of time training the Afghans on the care of equipment, including vehicle preventive maintenance, weapons maintenance, special equipment maintenance, and driver training. Providing small items such as weapon oil made their maintenance more productive. A windfall of vehicle parts allowed us to give

them what they needed while waiting for their Ministry of Defense requests to be filled.

readiness posture, we made it mandatory for the ANA to refuel before they parked their vehicles after operations. We mandated daily contact with each platoon and brought all platoon leaders, platoon sergeants, and U.S. and ANA company leaders together for weekly dinners. These events kept all route clearance teams in Paktika—American and Afghan—“giving way together.”

Fostering Self-Sufficiency

We were determined to build independence by emphasizing maintenance and trying to use ANA logistics channels first, demanding effort from the ANA before we provided anything. Self-sufficiency is purportedly the desired end state of all partnerships theater-wide. Unfortunately, it is frequently ignored in the name of expedience. Like the line between help and welfare, there is only so much assistance you can provide before dependency is created. On the other hand, missions cannot be run with empty bellies, empty fuel tanks, and broken vehicles. Support must come from somewhere, and the ANA system was not always adequate. Thus, a balance had to be struck.

First, we sought to understand the ANA logistics network. The RCC was task-organized as a “separate company,” reporting directly to their brigade commander. While this relationship was effective for command, it was poor for support. Having no battalion level assistance put the RCC at a severe disadvantage compared to other maneuver units, which have staffs and field grade commanders responsible for their well-being. We continued to provide material support for items such as fuel until the ANA logistics system began to function more effectively.

For parts and equipment shortages, we insisted that the RCC submit paperwork to the Ministry of Defense for

Results

When a combined patrol came under attack by an IED and small arms fire, our lead gun truck was destroyed. Soldiers from the RCC quickly dismounted, returned fire, and maneuvered on the hasty ambush position the enemy occupied. They were quick enough to capture two motorcycles and several weapons and magazines. After one of our vehicles took an IED strike during another patrol, the RCC Soldiers dismounted with mine detectors to search for secondary IEDs even before their help was requested. By the end of our 6 months together, we had progressed to the point that any of the RCC platoons could effectively partner with any of our platoons on any given mission. We conducted more than 100 combined patrols, improved our IED find-to-strike ratio from 33 percent without the ANA to 73 percent with them, and observed as they conducted more than 20 operations without U.S. assistance. The achievements of this U.S.-Afghan route clearance team were widely recognized by leaders of both nations, most notably by Lieutenant General Sher Mohammad Karimi, Chief of Army Staff in the Military of Afghanistan. During a visit to the brigade headquarters, he commended the RCC commander and dubbed us “the most successful partnership in Afghanistan.”



Captain Gillman is the commander of Alpha Company, 4th Brigade Special Troops Battalion, 4th Brigade Combat Team (Currahee), 101st Airborne Division (Air Assault). He graduated from the U.S. Military Academy in 2004 and holds a master's degree from Missouri University of Science and Technology at Rolla.