



Training in the Fight: Experiences in Afghanistan

By Major James X. Francis

Training a unit can be difficult even in a peaceful stateside setting. As the governments of Afghanistan and Iraq are stood up, however, our Soldiers are being tasked to train foreign soldiers in war zones. This presents special problems that need ingenious solutions. Issues such as culture and language are quickly apparent and must be dealt with. Other issues, such as leadership and equipment shortages, are not so easily managed. To combat these problems in Afghanistan, the United States Army has been sending Army National Guard Soldiers to act as “embedded team trainers” (ETT) for the Afghan National Army (ANA). While these two-Soldier teams are primarily trainers, they also serve as advisors and liaisons for combat operations. These teams are supposed to be the link between coalition troops and the ANA, enabling the Afghans to take more responsibility for their own defense.

Issues

During the past year, two engineers from the Missouri Army National Guard (MOARNG) were engaged in training the engineers of the ANA’s 1st Brigade, 205th Corps. Located in the volatile southern region of Kandahar,

the Afghan soldiers had been used as either infantry troops or laborers for coalition projects, despite their engineer training. The job of the MOARNG engineers was to reverse this trend.

Combat itself was the major training hindrance. The spring offensive of the Taliban began in March 2006. To counter this, coalition forces began their own series of offensives. The conventional wisdom was to put an “Afghan face” on the operations but, unfortunately, the Afghan infantry units were farmed out to United States Army Special Forces units. Therefore, the bulk of the offensive infantry missions fell to the ANA’s combat support soldiers—the headquarters, engineer, and artillery units. The official manpower and equipment of the ANA units would have made them well-suited to support both combat and construction operations. However, just as in any organization (much less a developing army like the ANA), the reality does not necessarily equate to the ideal on paper.

Leadership was another problem. Afghans still have a “warlord” mentality, which means that subordinate leaders were hesitant to do anything that the company commander did not expressly order. This and other issues affected the

leadership of the junior officers. Part of the complication was due to the Afghan culture. Another part was the fact that different segments of the ANA were taught according to different philosophies. The French were in charge of teaching the officers, while the British and Americans were responsible for training the enlisted soldiers. This caused a difference in approach to leadership within the ANA.

Solutions

The first major issue to solve was the misuse of the engineers. Engineers are unique in that they can have an impact on both combat and reconstruction efforts. The more the local leaders and villages could see their government working for the good of Afghanistan, the more local support there would be for the government. With the engineers leading reconstruction efforts, the government could be seen as a beneficial force rather than just another warlord. Unfortunately, the ANA and coalition leaders were focused on the kinetic effort and ignored the nonkinetic fight. Due to ongoing operations, the ETTs performed their ANA training while in a combat environment.

After four months of combat operations and with little or no training possible, word was received that the 1st Reconstruction Task Force (Australian) was asking for Afghan support in the province of Uruzgan. The ETTs pushed hard to deploy with the ANA soldiers for two major reasons. First, that would pull the engineers out of the reach of the local corps commander, who repeatedly committed them to infantry combat operations. Second, in exchange for supporting the reconstruction efforts, the Afghan engineers would receive training assistance and support from the Australians, which would establish a good symbiotic relationship.

The Australians put forth a training program and used their resources to teach the ANA soldiers skills such as carpentry and masonry, as well as selected combat skills. These skills were put to the test since the Afghans would go with the task force and assist in construction or help provide security. The results were so positive that remote village elders approached the ANA soldiers, promising security for coalition forces if the ANA would assist their villages. The International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) Southern Regional Command in Afghanistan cited the effort as a model of coalition and Afghan troops working together. A steady supply of positive reports for both the American and Afghan leadership maintained the mission and maintained distance from the Afghan command.



ANA engineers erect solar-powered lamp posts.

The first missions included security and checkpoints, as the two militaries learned each other's strengths. As confidence in the ANA soldiers' abilities grew, the missions branched out to minor carpentry tasks under Australian supervision. Eventually, the ANA soldiers were given missions under their own supervision as part of the reconstruction projects. At all times, the Australians kept the American advisors as part of the planning process, fostering a true coalition effort.

Partly due to the culture, partly due to their training, progress among the officer leadership abilities was limited. On the other hand, the noncommissioned officers (NCOs) developed quite well and earned the respect of their men by their actions and abilities. The follow-on American advisors were briefed and expected to focus on the officer training portion.

Because of the poor supply system, replacements for broken equipment were difficult to get through the ANA system. The Australians were excellent about helping out and



Australian, American, and Afghani engineers repair a mosque.

bought tools for the trainees. While using this “backdoor” technique, the ETTs continually pressed the ANA officers and NCOs to push paperwork through the Afghan system to expose where the problem lay.

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Results

Overall, the solutions to the problems enabled successful training and missions. The year highlighted the ANA engineers’ construction—as well as combat—abilities and their success at reaching out to the local communities. The cooperation of the Reconstruction Task Force and the ANA was beneficial to both sides and showed the advantages of true partnership. More successes of this nature in both Iraq and Afghanistan will allow national forces in both places to take more control of their own defenses and require fewer rotations for American and coalition troops.



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