

UNITED STATES SPECIAL OPERATIONS FORCES IN AFGHANISTAN

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Abstract: *This synoptic paper lays out the particularities of the United States Special Operation Forces (SOF) missions in Afghanistan. It describes the activities undertaken by the deployed operational detachments in order to develop and set up a new Afghan security element. The paper focuses on the stages of the process by pointing out the accomplishments and difficulties encountered in the development process for each stage. The authors want to underline the efforts undertaken by the developing team in order to set up the Afghan National Police Provincial Response Company (ANP PRC) in the challenging local and international environment. The study is based on the first hand experience of the author, who was deployed with an US Special Operations Task Force in Afghanistan. During his combat tour, the author was part of the ANP PRC developing team.*

Keywords: *United States Special Operations Forces, Military Assistance, Afghanistan, Afghan National Police - ANP, Provincial Response Company - PRC*

1. INTRODUCTION

The United States deployed its first combat elements in Afghanistan shortly after the 9/11 attacks on World Trade Center, New York. The first units to be deployed consisted of Special Operations Forces (SOF) supported by Intelligence agencies and US Air Force. Their main focus was the defeat of the Taliban forces. Special Operations Detachments conducted combat missions along with the Northern Alliance in order to defeat the Taliban forces in Afghanistan. They were heavily supported by the US Air Force to conduct surgical strikes against key Taliban positions and combat elements. Within just a couple of months, the Taliban forces were defeated and the Taliban regime ousted from power. Immediately after, the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) [1] established the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) mission in Afghanistan [2].

ISAF's main line of effort was to develop the Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF) in order to ensure local, regional, and national level security and stability to allow proper reconstruction of key infrastructure and government authorities. Within this line of effort, ISAF forces focused on training, assisting, and combat advising the existing ANSF units. In the same time, as situation on the ground required, ISAF forces helped local and regional authorities to set up new ANSF forces to deal with the security of the local population and to fight the insurgents in the respective areas. In this campaign, Romanian and United States SOF worked together to provide assistance to local and regional authorities.

This is part of the Military Assistance (MA) mission [3] which is performed by SOF. Although, this mission is not as exciting as other SOF missions (for example DA- Direct Action) it is a very important mission because it produces long term effects with regard to security and stability of a country.

During the combat deployments, the US and Romanian SOF helped Afghan local authorities to develop new security forces able to handle the complex security situation in different areas of the country. One of the most successful projects was the establishment of the Afghan National Police Provincial Response Company (ANP PRC). The process of establishing the ANP PRC was not an easy one and it will be the main focus of our short study.

2. BACKGROUND

After the initial push successfully conducted by SOF, the number of the NATO forces involved in the Afghan campaign grew. These forces were tasked to assist the ANSF in securing the country to allow for proper reconstruction. Even though the number of personnel has grown, Afghanistan was facing multiple security challenges. In some areas, security was so bad that reconstruction was impossible. In those areas, there were no public gatherings, no markets, and very limited movement on roads due to the Improvised Explosive Devices (IED). Since their initial deployment, SOF trained, assisted, and combat advised elements of the Afghan National Army (ANA). These were expeditionary forces which conducted missions across wider regions. In the same time, ANA was missing any connection with the regions they were operating in. Therefore, they had access to limited intelligence and support provided by the local population. In this context, SOF quickly realized that the military's main mission is to defend the country from external threats. The force of choice for internal security is the Police. Why? Simply because Police forces are usually recruited from the same area they are operating in. As a result, police officers have better access to accurate and timely intelligence which is the key to success for any operation. Also, being from the area allows police officers to better interact with local population who can provide a wide range of support for the local and coalition security forces.

Given the reasons mentioned above, starting 2009, US SOF part of ISAF SOF focused on developing a police force capable of providing security in some very troubled provinces of Afghanistan. A Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) was signed by ISAF SOF and the Afghan Ministry of Interior. But the simple signing of this memorandum did not change anything on the ground. In the majority of the provinces where ISAF SOF was operating, the security situation was getting worse. The teams deployed on the ground were demanding more ANSF to support their efforts to secure and stabilize the regions. In the majority of cases, the existing Afghan Police forces were low in numbers, poorly organized and equipped. Some of the police officers were corrupted and the local population did not see any difference from them and the Taliban. These factors prevented coalition SOF from securing some areas to allow for reconstruction.

3. ESTABLISHING THE ANP PRC

In the second half of 2009, US SOF started to concentrate more on developing the ANP PRC from a simple idea written on a piece of paper to a credible and effective force which could provide security for the provinces they were operating in. Within this frame, US SOF Task Force deployed with ISAF SOF established a partnering officer at the Task Force (TF) level.

His main responsibility would be to coordinate the efforts of all the teams on the ground in order to develop the ANP PRC. This would turn to be a very challenging task. Initially, there was a simple piece of white paper, like an empty canvas. There were no concepts, doctrine, Military/Modification Table of Organizational Equipment (MTOE), guidance and so on. The partnering officer had to envision a police force that would be capable to deploy throughout the province and effectively conduct high risk missions.

The initial stage took about two months to develop an MTOE. This involved multiple meetings, discussions, debates, and negotiations among different parties. The intent was to create a police force capable of collecting accurate intelligence in order to conduct operations throughout the province. Therefore, the force was designed to encompass an intelligence cell, a strike force, and a support element. To increase effectiveness, the ANP PRC had to be equipped with better and more modern equipment than the average Afghan police officer. This would include computers, intelligence collection devices, armored vehicles High Mobility Multipurpose Wheeled Vehicle (HMMVWs), and weapons optics. The ANP PRC would be controlled by the Afghan Provincial Police Chief and the Governor to avoid misuse of the force. Although this package looks like a military company, the ANP PRC was designed to operate in the volatile Afghan security environment. This is not the police force that most Western countries are used with. It had to be stronger and better equipped to accomplish the intended high risk missions. Also, the ANP PRC was designed as an independent force capable of collecting and processing intelligence to allow proper planning and execution of missions. In this way, the PRC would not have to rely on other agencies to provide intelligence.

The Afghan National Police Provincial Response Company is a tactical level unit of the Afghan Police which managed to achieve operational and strategic effects. PRCs successfully conducted independent high risk, warrant based operations which crippled the insurgent networks in the provinces they operated [4].

The next step proved to be as challenging as the initial one. This was to present the concept to other coalition partners, ISAF and Afghan decision makers. This step looked like an advertising campaign for a new product and involved a lot of discussions among all parties involved. As one can imagine, there was a lot of push back US and Romanian SOF had to deal with. There was a lot of reticence to adapt new forces, because the Afghan battlefield seemed suffocated by operating parties. The hardest entity to convince was the Afghan Ministry of Interior because they had to provide money for salaries. To complicate things even more, creating this structure involved estimating and finding funds to build training, working, and accommodation facilities. At this stage, the project became an interagency effort because it required the involvement of the engineers, both military and civilian, logistics commands, Provincial Reconstruction Teams (PRT), local Afghan companies, and the Afghan Ministries of Interior and Finance. Each one of these entities had to be convinced to support the project. This involved multiple rounds of negotiations and meeting with key personnel. United States and Romanian SOF consistently engaged these agencies to ensure the project is approved, funded, and integrated in the Afghan and coalition battle tracking systems [5].

Once the construction process started, SOF focused on recruiting and vetting of the future police officers. Since, US and Romanian SOF were already working with different local and regional security initiatives, these offered the initial pool of personnel to recruit from. Some of those initiatives were Road Maintenance Teams (RMTs) and Village Security Teams (VSTs). These were security initiatives of the local population who was tired of insurgents and organized into small groups to provide for their own communities security. SOF exploited and supported these initiatives to foster their combat capabilities. The personnel from RMTs or VSTs had been trained and vetted.

Therefore, it seemed like a logic and facile way to recruit the police officers needed to man the PRC in the provinces where these initiatives existed. This process posed legal challenges that SOF had to overcome. They required further negotiations with the Afghan decision makers to identify a legal way to get the locals operating security initiatives into the PRC. Once this was settled, SOF turned to the Police Academy and meritorious police officers throughout Afghanistan.

Simultaneously, SOF had to develop the training program Program of Instruction (POI). This was also a complicated process because the new police force required specialized training that the coalition military did not have. This included evidence collection, evidence handling, and prosecution techniques. Historically, ANSF and coalition forces have learned that it is not enough to capture a bad guy if one cannot provide timely and proper evidence to the Afghan court. In many instances, Afghan insurgents captured after risky operations have walked out of prison because there was little evidence or the existing evidence was compromised. To overcome this, SOF coordinated with deployed coalition police officers to teach the PRC police officers police type of training. Also, SOF coordinated with intelligence agencies to provide the Afghan police officers with the right intelligence training required to collect, analyze, and disseminate effective information to allow mission planning [6].

In the same time, SOF started to identify, track, and deliver the force the required equipment. Again, this stage had its own challenges. There were many instances when the equipment would disappear in the Afghan system. As a result, SOF realized that it had to provide people to track the shipments of equipment in order to get them to the intended beneficiary which was the PRC personnel. Upon completion of training, the PRCs conducted combat operations alongside coalition partners. Gradually, the coalition support reduced to allow the PRC to handle the security situation in their Area of Operations (AO). Eventually, by mid 2010, some PRCs started to conduct successful independent Warrant Based Operations (WBO). These were operations based on an arrest warrant granted by an Afghan judge.

4. KEY FACTORS IN ESTABLISHING THE PRCs

The most important factor was the hard work and dedication the men of the Special Operations Task Force put into this project. These counted many hours of discussions, brainstorming, and sleepless nights to develop the concept. Once the idea came to life, SOF personnel had to work hard to convince key leadership that the PRC is a viable solution to deal with the security challenges in the provinces ISAF SOF was operating. Then, they had to coordinate the interagency effort to build bases. Furthermore, SOF had to fight for money and equipment to support the PRC. Ultimately, they had to test the concept in real and high risk combat operations.

Another key factor was the dedication of some exceptional Afghan police officers. In some of the provinces, the PRCs were commanded by Afghans who understood the importance of this project for the security of their region and country, too. All of them along with the PRCs personnel jeopardized their lives every day to make a better Afghanistan. These officers provided the PRC with the legitimacy required to win the support of the local population who started to see the new force as an effective security provider in the region. Also, having courageous commanders sent a strong message to the insurgents in the area that the PRC will not give up and will continue to fight for the security of the province.

Despite all challenges, the first PRCs declared Initial Operational Capability (IOC) at the beginning of 2010. Furthermore, by mid 2010, there was a PRC in every province where ISAF SOF operational elements were deployed [7].

Moreover, the support of local authorities and population was crucial for the success of the PRC. It is well known that in any counter-insurgency campaign the local population plays a central role in the outcome of the campaign. This was also true for Afghanistan. In the provinces where the PRCs were most successful the local population supported ANSF and confronted the insurgents. Working together, locals, PRC, and coalition forces allowed the local population to return to normal lives, to travel, and to live with no fear for their lives.

Nevertheless, establishing the PRC offered the US SOF a chance to learn valuable lessons which could be used in similar deployments [8].

Ultimately, the relation between Special Operations Forces and their Afghan counterparts was very important for the success of this project. Intercultural skills and training provided to Special Operations Forces personnel before deployments allowed for a great working relationship with the PRC. This relationship was based on trust, respect, and mutual support. Members of the PRC fought and lived alongside with their Special Operations Forces operational teams. This increased the effectiveness of the PRCs and significantly contributed to the security of the provinces. Within this framework, personal relationships mattered the most. The majority of SOF operators were deployed several times in a couple of years in the same province. This gave them the opportunity to work with the same PRC, which saved time and effort in the long run, that would have had to be spent on understanding the operating environment [9].

CONCLUSIONS

The development of the project started in 2009 by the members of the United States Special Operations Force deployed under ISAF SOF command. This process was not an easy endeavor because SOF had to negotiate with many agencies to get this project moving forward. Furthermore, every stage of the development process came with its own set of challenges and obstacles. As a result, SOF had to constantly adapt in order to pursue the desired outcome. Members of the Task Force had to push hard to convince the decision makers about the importance of the PRC for the security of Afghanistan. Additionally, they had to coordinate an interagency effort to build bases, provide money for salaries, and conduct training with the PRCs.

Also, in the same year some PRCs conducted their first independent warrant based operations. This has to be considered a major success given the challenges and short period of time to stand this structure up. Probably, the factor that contributed to the rapid success of the PRC is that this structure was established at the regional level first. The PRC concept was approved at the Ministry of Interior and ISAF level, but was implemented regionally rather than finding a nation-wide solution. Each PRC had its own particularities based on the security situation from the province it operated in. The one-size-fits-all approach does not work in tribal societies. Approaching security at the regional level offered United States Special Operations Forces a greater chance of success in combating insurgency.

Also, it proved that small size elements like the Operational Detachments Alpha can have a significant impact at the operational and strategic level. The PRCs are still operational and they fight every day to provide security and protection for the local population. Also, they contribute to the strengthening of the local government which will eventually lead to a safer and better Afghanistan.

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