

NATO Special Operations Forces in Afghanistan: lessons learned from a Belgian perspective

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“Flat, fast comms.” That is the catchphrase of Major General DONAHUE C. whilst commanding and guiding the NSOCC-A headquarters (HQ). Rightfully so, because commanding over 8000 troops on 20 different locations, coming from 25 different countries surely demands coherent communication to operate. Although not being an easy task, he does succeed in getting the best out of all men and women serving under his command. The unsure environment, the international political pressure, an absent Afghan economic power and hired guns that always end up at the side of the highest bidder, can surely bring a lot of pressure. Luckily, resilience to pressure is what Special Operations Forces (SOF) excel in. Whether we agree or not to be in Afghanistan is in some way irrelevant because our military duty commands us to execute political engagements. What is truly our responsibility is to learn from real time engagements, acquiring knowledge on how to defeat a real, volatile and evolving enemy, find knowhow on how to overcome unforeseen problems and be able to implement compatibility within the international community. From its recently relocated HQ in camp Sullivan (Kabul), NSOCC-A provides all of the above.

Acting as the strongest kinetic strike capability within the Afghan area of operational responsibility, NSOCC-A is dual-hatted. It not only acts as the Combined Joint Special Operations Headquarters for the NATO Resolute Support Mission, it is also the muscle of US Operation Freedom Sentinel, where the global fight against terrorism is continued. As a Belgian Voluntary National Contribution, we were to fill a post reinforcing the

planning team (CJ5 cell) at the HQ itself and supply a Special Operations Forces Liaison Element (SOFLE) in Mazar-e-Sharif. The CJ5 position quickly evolved into an assistant operations officer position (DCOS Ops assistant), where we became the sole point of contact for the representation of all NATO/coalition Special Operations Advisory Teams in a headquarters lead by a two-star general. The SOFLE coordinated all Special Operations with other counterparts and stakeholders to ensure synergy on the battlefield in the northern part of Afghanistan. Needless to say: lessons were learned. We would like to share some of these lessons in order to make them common knowledge within our collective minds, henceforth improving our operational readiness in conflicts to come.

**Communication: the imparting or exchanging of information
by speaking, writing, or using some other medium.
Make sure you master it.**

Being critical to the chain of information and decisions within an active and international headquarters, interpersonal communication is the main proficiency to master. If you do not understand a guideline, a reference, a subtlety or worse, a direct order from the general himself, you can quickly find yourself avoided or discarded for future briefings. Most commanders will not take the time to explain themselves twice. On the other hand, a strong communicator with good people skills can be a tremendous asset to amplify the national investment. These skills must be considered before we send people abroad. It might sound like an old cliché, but teamwork does make the dream work.



NSOCC-A would not be an American lead headquarter if it was not characterised by abundant air support. F16 squadrons, C-130 gunships, attack helicopters, air-to-air refuelling and drones 24/7 give one overall certainty: they own the sky. Although abundant, it is not nearly enough to support all planned SOF missions. The high bomb threat makes air movements the only way to mitigate this risk. If SOF teams deploy without own tactical transport helicopters, they will find themselves at the mercy of those who can supply it. Depending on the importance of a mission, it could take a long time before this mercy finds your way. Having air assets to train and operate with, makes the difference in being a useful national contribution to international efforts. No general would ever accept any mission proposals from SOF units without air support, because the conduct of such missions is considered foolish and often fatal. Therefore, the question itself of ‘needing helicopters within the SOF community’ is useless. The answer is already there, whether we agree to it or not.



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Use of helicopters during missions to provide more safety for own troops

One of the most important international investments in the Afghan Armed Forces goes to the Special Mission Wing. They are part of the Afghan Air Force but are solely assigned to special operations. This means that all missions, which have a special operations

character, have own assets to assure mobility, flexibility and provide maximum safety for own troops. They also cover more ground since they must be able to reach out to villages far away on short notice. Knowing that the landscape of Afghanistan is very similar to most African countries, this has proven the best way to operate. The integration of air assets within the special operations forces proves to be quite the success story. Since the success is proven, why aren't we doing this?

**Always trust the guy on the ground and allow him to do his job.
There is no one with a better understanding of the current situation.**

Adding to the necessity of air means is flexibility to act. It seems clear that most nations try to control the use of their troops, or keep them out of harm's way by imposing a long list of national pre-employment procedures, adding to the already existing caveats¹. While the idea is noble and human, it also has a downside. Caveats can have a clear purpose but should not be paralleled by extra regulations. If you need a problem solved in the safest and most efficient way possible, you need to provide liberty to do so. A commander on the ground will always have a more realistic vision and feeling of the current situation than someone back home, contemplating behind a desk, not to mention the loss of time and momentum to act due to this "consultation-to-consent" procedure. We should remember what William Tecumseh Sherman once said: "Every attempt to make war easy and safe will result in humiliation and disaster."

The "flexibility to act and decide" ensures a stronger and safer output of SOF operations, because they are generally the quickest way to respond to any upcoming threat. Whether that threat translates itself into a hostage rescue operation, a special reconnaissance mission, a key leader engagement or responding to new enemy tactics, techniques and procedures, it always involves SOF in some way. Commanders sometimes ask a lot of these troops, so they must receive the liberty to train for it.

All successful SOF units in Afghanistan have a weapon shop, a vehicle shop, a variety of equipment, medical support and knowledge to excel in different domains. The last point being investments in tactical site exploitation techniques, information processing

¹ caveat/restriction: "In NATO operations, any limitation, restriction or constraint by a nation on its military forces or civilian elements under NATO command and control or otherwise available to NATO, that does not permit NATO commanders to deploy and employ these assets fully in line with the approved operation plan."

and maintaining a close connection with their national higher command. Nations who provide means, capabilities and close contact up to the lowest level, flourish more during operations and suffer less casualties than nations not providing it.



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Afghan SOF training with NATO counterparts

Obviously, ensuring flexibility demands mission command, available operational budgets at a low level and a minimum of restrictions imposed on the executing specialists. Hence, if we know this is the reality during operations, we should not hamper SOF with cumbersome procedures, but reinforce them with trust and autonomy.

If commanders are appointed, let them command.

In a recent past, Belgian SOF leaders stated that Assault Explosive Ordinance Disposal (deminers), Deep Development Teams, Military Working Dogs and intelligence processing capacity needed to be part of SOF units. Today we see that all international

partners confirm the importance of these developments for successful SOF operations. We would be falling behind today if those ideas were left unsupported. This is a perfect example of a much-needed flexible mind-set to the highest level: providing liberty to change or adapt to new threats and a quick accessibility to certain budgets to facilitate improvements. Developing a response to new enemy tactics should be able to bypass yearlong studies, working groups and the classic market research or analysis. In general, SOF troops are relatively cheap: they invest in people, so the investment is never lost.

The more, the merrier. Maybe not.

A last but important observation during our period in NSOCC-A is logistical footprint. It was very clear from the beginning of the mission that the commanding generals in theatre receive intense political pressure to reduce the number of deployed troops. This problem is not tied to the Afghanistan conflict, but it will always be part of the political-military dynamic. The larger a detachment, the more their contribution is perceived as a burden rather than a solution to the operational endeavour. The best-observed SOF solution was a modular design with minimalistic support elements. The more qualifications or knowledge you can combine in one person, the better it is. One SOF soldier can also be responsible for logistical equipment, conduct basic maintenance tasks or perform administrative tasks. Let us not forget that every man or woman we deploy, also needs protection. “More people” seems to result in “more problems and a much slower output in military performance.” This was observed on different locations and within all NATO/coalition troops.

Experience: The process of acquiring knowledge or skills from doing, seeing, or feeling things.

Enemy techniques change on constant basis, which is an issue for any conflict worldwide. In order to address changes and remain effective, we need to remain agile in mind-set, flexible in execution and decisive in what we want to achieve. Current national problems as recruitment, budgets and structural changes should not hamper us in sending individuals to active conflicts. Whether it is as an observer, a staff officer or

an active part of the fighting force, it is the only way to remain aware of current threats and how to better contain them. Failing to do so will cut us from today's reality and cost us more in the long run. Being part of an operating SOCC or other international HQ, even for a short time, gives tremendous experience that cannot be replaced by a Power Point briefing, a book on a reading list, or even this short article.

Observations are subjective by nature; if you have doubts regarding the topics mentioned, feel free to reach out to and schedule a coffee meet with one of the authors.



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SOF in training

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