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## **Special Operations Forces and Conventional Forces Integration**

### **Lessons Learned in Village Stability Operations**

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## Executive Summary

Beginning in 2010, conventional battlespace owners (BSO) and the Combined Joint Special Operations Task Force – Afghanistan (CJSOTF-A) made history when they successfully integrated an infantry squad with a special operations force (SOF) Team to conduct Village Stability Operations (VSO)<sup>i</sup>. The integration effort successfully continues today with every VSO team containing SOF operators and conventional force (CF) soldiers. Also, under the command of the CJSOTF-A, two infantry battalion headquarters (HQ) command and control SOF and CF in multiple areas of Afghanistan.

Although the integration effort has proven effective, there are six major issues that, if not addressed immediately by both CF and SOF leadership, could prevent further gains and/or disrupt future CF and SOF integration efforts in VSO. The six issues are: *infantry battalion selection; alignment of deployment schedules and pre-mission training (PMT); CF soldier screening; adequate SOF advisers; VSO focused training; and adherence to SOF tactics, techniques, and procedures (TTP)*. Each of these will be addressed in detail in the findings and recommendations section.

## Mission

SOF integrated with infantry squads conduct VSO, which includes developing Afghan Local Police (ALP)<sup>ii</sup>, in executing “bottom-up” counterinsurgency (COIN) to combat the Taliban insurgency by facilitating security, governance, and development.

## Introduction

Over the past 10 years on the battlefield, SOF and CF were forced to learn and re-learn how to work together, with little doctrinal assistance, and sift through and overcome existing negative attitudes, egos, and biases in order to accomplish their missions. From the lowest units (Special Forces Operational Detachment – Alpha (SFODA) and infantry squad), to the highest echelons (Combined Forces Special Operations Component Command – Afghanistan (CFSOCC-A) and International Security Assistance Force (ISAF)), never in United States military history have both conventional and special operations (SO) organizations integrated so intricately and successfully.<sup>iii</sup>

In 2009, then COMISAF, General Stanley McCrystal, shifted the campaign strategy in Afghanistan from enemy to population-centric which set the conditions for development of the VSO program. Due to the initial successes and increased demand for expansion of the program, the supply of SOF teams available quickly diminished. Adhering to *SOF Truth #5* which states that, “most SO require non-SOF assistance,” the CJSOTF-A solicited CF in order to reinforce SOF to expand Village Stability Platforms (VSP)<sup>iv</sup>. Battlespace Owner (BSO) Infantry platoons and squads were assigned to SOF teams not only as enablers, but also to conduct the tenets of VSO alongside SOF.<sup>v</sup>

In November 2010, in order to further increase VSO capacity, General David Petraeus, then COMISAF, requested an infantry battalion (1-16<sup>th</sup> CAB, 1<sup>st</sup> Brigade, 1<sup>st</sup> Infantry Division) for deployment and assignment of Operational Control (OPCON) to the Combined Forces Special Operations Component Command – Afghanistan (CFSOCC-

A) and Tactical Control (TACON) to the CJSOTF-A. 1-16<sup>th</sup> CAB arrived in Afghanistan in January 2010, and integrated their 26 squads with SOF conducting VSO across all the Regional Commands (RC). CJSOTF-A tasked the battalion HQs to perform as the Village Stability Coordination Center (VSCC) – North.<sup>vi</sup> To exploit the gains met by increasing VSO capacity, a second infantry battalion (1-505<sup>th</sup> Parachute Infantry Regiment (PIR), 3<sup>rd</sup> Brigade Combat Team, 82<sup>d</sup> Airborne Division) deployed in support of OEF in July 2011.<sup>vii</sup>

1-505<sup>th</sup> PIR was later designated as TF-1 Panther and given the same primary task of providing reinforcements to CJSOTF-A. TF-1 Panther was further given increased responsibility to function as a Special Operations Task Force (SOTF) where they executed mission command of all SOF conducting VSO in RC-North. CF are not traditionally selected, trained, or equipped to conduct VSO, therefore, CJSOTF-A embedded SOF advisors within TF-1 Panther's command and staff to provide mentorship and guidance in order to operate effectively as a SOTF.<sup>viii</sup> This minimal effort to supply the CF unit with a handful of SOF advisors resulted in further expansion of VSO.

The contributions by the two infantry battalions that continue to be employed today (TF Balkh/1-30<sup>th</sup> IN and TF Ghazni/2-3<sup>rd</sup> IN recently replaced 1-16<sup>th</sup> CAB and 1-505 PIR), enabled SOF to expand the VSO program exponentially supporting the ISAF campaign plan to facilitate, "Afghans standing up for Afghans."

### **Purpose and Intent**

The purpose of this lessons learned compilation is to magnify the existing issues that SOF and CF face together in VSO. The intent is for decision makers to implement the offered recommendations immediately to capitalize on the integrated efforts contributed thus far in VSO by the warriors in the field.

### **Method**

The research consisted of extracting and consolidating previously written After Action Review (AAR) comments compiled by SOF and CF units who conducted integrated VSO from late 2010 to now. Additionally, the author conducted battlefield circulation (BFC) across Afghanistan in March-April 2012 in order to interview SOF and CF officers and NCOs and gain their insight on conducting integrated VSO.

The six major issues identified are:

1. Selecting the optimal infantry battalions to conduct VSO
2. Aligning and protecting CF and SOF deployment schedules
3. Assessing and selecting soldiers and leaders possessing the required physical, mental, and emotional capabilities for executing VSO

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4. Assigning adequate SOF advisers to CF infantry battalion HQs functioning as SOTFs
5. Focusing primarily on VSO tasks when conducting PMT at both Combat Training Centers (CTC) and home stations
6. Adhering to all SOF TTPs / Standard Operating Procedures (SOP) in conducting VSO

### Scope

The findings and recommendations identified in this paper are exclusive to SOF and CF integration in VSO for ongoing and future combat rotations. They may transcend to other mission sets that demand integration for future conflicts beyond OEF. CF, unless otherwise specified, refers to the two CF infantry battalions that are OPCON to CFSOCC-A, and not assigned to ISAF. The battalions utilized to date in VSO have varied in type, to include Airborne, Stryker, and Mechanized Infantry, and/or Combined Arms (Mechanized/Armor). For simplification purposes, the term “infantry battalion” is used throughout the paper to generically denote the TACON battalion conducting VSO.

### Doctrinal Lessons Learned

*FM 6-03.05 and USSOCOM Pub 3-33 v.3*, dated 17 March 2010, states that, “CF/SOF units should meet and integrate early, prior to combat rotations, to foster the relationship, instill the “one team, one fight” mentality, understand each other’s staff planning procedures, and defuse any misconceptions or friction points. If at all possible, units should attend training events together, specifically at the National Training Center (NTC) or joint readiness training center (JRTC). Good practices include traveling to one’s home station, briefing each other’s capabilities and limitations, mission goals, and linking up staff function sections.

### U.S. Army and USSOCOM Way Ahead

In February 2012, U.S. Army Chief of Staff (CSA), General Raymond Odierno and CDRUSSOCOM, Admiral William McCraven, along with their principal staffs and select subordinate commanders, met to discuss and create a plan of action for the future of SOF and CF integration. The top two points of discussion were on the future of SOF and CF integration and the way ahead for integration in Afghanistan (actual point this paper addresses). For the first point, the group, “outline(d) a potential construct for future SOF-Conventional integration through the lens of SOF-Conventional experience and lessons learned over the last decade.” As for the second point, the group, “consider(ed) options for the way ahead, command structures, and SOF/GPF integration as we go forward in Afghanistan.” Operational planning teams have been formed and recommended courses of action are due to the CSA and CDRUSSOCOM in the next couple of months. <sup>ix</sup>

## Findings/Recommendations

### **ISSUE #1:** Selecting the optimal Infantry Battalions to conduct VSO

DISCUSSION: For VSO, the CJSOTF-A requires the TACON CF infantry battalion to organize and operate like a light infantry battalion. A light infantry battalion consists of 27 light infantry squads that train in dismounted operations that are required for the VSO mission. Each squad is assigned to a SOF team located at various villages across Afghanistan. U.S. Army/FORSCOM chose mechanized Infantry or combined arms battalions to conduct VSO in 5 of the 6 rotations. In order to meet the light infantry battalion requirement, the non-light infantry battalions were forced to completely reorganize their unit structure, reassign personnel to include leadership and staff. Reorganizing was very difficult and time consuming for the battalions to complete which took away valuable time to conduct PMT.

### OBSERVATIONS:

- *“Infantry and Armor Soldiers possess different skill sets and the infantry dismounted Soldiers were better trained to conduct the squad focused mission in Afghanistan” – TF Balkh/1-30<sup>th</sup> IN First Look AAR (1.0)*
- *“The infantry units that are assigned to the SF detachments should come from more specialized units and not mechanized brigades...Ranger type elements will always be preferred to include: an infantry scout platoon, long range reconnaissance units or 82<sup>d</sup> Airborne Soldiers.” –SOTF-E AAR*
- *“Mechanized units are historically not as active as a...light infantry unit. They are not accustomed to walking the required distances an SFODA is prepared to do...our Afghan force...essentially outperformed the mechanized infantry attachments.” – SOTF-E OEF AAR*
- *“Partner light infantry only and more specifically airborne/air assault units if possible.” – Interview with Special Forces SGM integrated with CF*
- *“Individual skills translate easily for airborne and light infantry to SOF mission.” – TF 1 Panther, SOF/GPF Integration PPT brief*

RECOMMENDATION: The U.S. Army G3 and/or FORSCOM should select light Infantry battalions, at a minimum and more specifically specialized light infantry, as the CF to conduct integrated VSO with SOF. Although the non-Infantry units have performed well, the intent is to research and select the optimal course of action.<sup>x</sup> Light infantry battalions most mirror the SOF units with respect to how they are organized, trained, and equipped and therefore stand the best chance for transition to working with SOF. Additionally, specialized light infantry units possess soldiers who mostly have gone through a further layer of volunteerism and thereby an indirect selection process, i.e. Airborne School, which may give them a notch up over other type forces.

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\*Caveat: The next five issues are valid and relevant for whichever type infantry battalion is selected.

### **ISSUE #2:** Aligning and protecting CF and SOF deployment schedules

DISCUSSION: CF and SOF deployment schedules are not aligned nor synchronized. This prevents SOF and CF from linking up early and often to build relationships, conduct PMT, and mitigate potential problems associated with integration such as differing SOPs, unit cultures, and TTPs.

#### OBSERVATIONS:

- *“It would be advantageous to align and synchronize future rotations with planned SOF rotations to maximize pre-deployment integration and take advantage of Pre-Mission Training (PMT).” – TF-Iron Ranger (1-16<sup>th</sup> CAB) RSOI Lessons Learned 90-day Progress Report*
- *“[CF] attached to SOF should conduct PMT with their SOF teams while in CONUS. This would allow SOF and [CF] to begin building a professional relationship while learning each other’s SOPs. Additionally, conducting joint training during PMT would allow SOF senior advisers to identify the [CFs] strengths and weaknesses.” – TF1 Panther RSOI 70-Day First Look Report*
- *“Identify conventional units and partner them with their SOF counterpart as early as possible. Both units should conduct pre-mission training (PMT) together in order to build rapport, camaraderie, and give the gaining SOF unit an opportunity to assess the conventional unit and tailor their PMT accordingly.” – TF-Iron Ranger RSOI 90-Day Rollup*
- *“Early integration prior to deployment would help alleviate the integration issues.” – Interview with AOB leadership*
- *“Aligning deployment timelines is the best course of action so that we (CF and SOF) can conduct PMT early and often.” – Interview with TF Balkh Cdr*
- *“Our soldiers deploy [longer than] their ODA counterparts. Consider synchronizing deployments, PMT, etc., as part of the request for forces (RFF).” – TF-Iron Ranger RSOI 90-Day Rollup*

RECOMMENDATION: FORSCOM and SOCOM must ensure that their unit’s deployment timelines align in order to build effective relationships and synchronize PMT. This should also include having the CF units physically deploy with the supported SOF unit and project the same pre- and post-deployment activities. Issues and challenges for the first CF unit to conduct VSO, 1-16 CAB, were understandable, but future CF infantry battalions must be better prepared.

**ISSUE #3:** Assessing and selecting soldiers and leaders possessing the required physical, mental, and emotional capabilities for executing VSO

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DISCUSSION: VSO requires extreme physical, mental, and emotional resiliency. SOF, based on their assessment and selection process, specialized skills, maturity level, and vast experience, are well suited to conduct missions in complex and unstable environments (CUE) where VSO are conducted. CF soldiers and leaders may not typically possess those important qualities needed in order to work with SOF. On occasion, SOF identified CF soldiers who struggled to operate in austere environments, maneuver in difficult dismounted terrain, and function in CUEs. Some of the Infantry battalions, however, did conduct a level of screening in order to identify at-risk soldiers and subsequently dropped them from the deployment roster.

### OBSERVATIONS:

- *“The infantry battalions must conduct an assessment and selection process and, if possible, a VSO qualification course to ensure the soldiers can handle the highly stressful and dynamic environments in doing VSO.”* – Interview with Special Forces SGM integrated with CF
- *“Collectively, [the CF] squad is junior to USSF ODA in experience and maturity. Choose [the] ‘right’ squad leaders for the mission and reassign junior enlisted with personal (mental health, discipline, marriage, etc) issues.”* – TF 1 Panther, SOF/GPF Integration PPT brief
- *“Personal issues, past discipline issues, and prescriptions for mood altering drugs were all considered during the new team building process. The reorganization generated significant administrative actions.”* – TF Balkh/1-30<sup>th</sup> IN First Look AAR (1.0)
- *“To effectively walk into an Afghan village and begin conducting VSO requires a huge amount of maturity, personality, and soldier skills...There must be a screening process for the squad, with maturity and patience high on the list of required attributes.”* – Trip Report: Yawzai (Fusion) Squad ALP Embed

RECOMMENDATION: Infantry battalions must screen their leaders and soldiers through a selection process to identify the type of individual who will be able to interact successfully with SOF. The CF soldiers must possess the physical, mental, and emotional capability to work in austere areas under extreme conditions required in VSO. Bottom line: not all CF personnel, to include officers and NCOs, possess the appropriate mentalities, abilities, or acceptable level of desire to be able to integrate well with and operate effectively with SOF.

**ISSUE #4:** Assigning adequate SOF advisers to CF infantry battalion headquarters functioning as SOTF

DISCUSSION: Infantry battalions do not possess the required staff billets to mission command a Special Forces Advanced Operational Base (AOB) with multiple SOF-CF teams executing VSO. The battalion requires an inoculation of SOF advisers and mentors at various staff functions in order to operate effectively and efficiently as a SOTF.

OBSERVATIONS:

- *“A SOTF is typically made up of dozens of senior SOF operators enabled by special operations trained support, logistics, communications personnel, and various other service members with experience working with SF. The SOTF is staffed by several field grade officers and post-command ODA commanders, senior Warrant officers, and senior NCOs with cumulative decades of ODA and AOB experience.”* – SOTF-W OEF AAR
- *“GPF Headquarters can serve as SOTF, but it will require augmentation, specifically in the S2 section.”* – TF 1 Panther, SOF/GPF Integration PPT brief
- *“The conventional battalions LTs and CPTs were re-tasked and are working in staff functions that are outside their training with little to no experience. Their battalion struggles with certain functions that a SOTF normally does not. The battalion staff needs an infusion of a few more SOF advisors to assist the unit to increase their capabilities.”* – Interview with AOB leadership
- *“...if the SOF advisers had been furnished...all aspects of operations both at the AOB and [Infantry Battalion HQ] would have been more efficient and less friction between units would have occurred. It would not be reasonable to expect a SF battalion...to effectively C2 and employ an aviation troop, or a MP battalion...”* – SOTF-W OEF AAR

RECOMMENDATION: CJSOTF-A must conduct a detailed analysis to ensure that the current and future infantry battalions are optimally configured with the right amount of SOF advisors and mentors based on feedback from both the infantry battalion and the AOB assigned. For future OEF rotations, CJSOTF-A should consider requesting an ODB from USASFC to train, deploy, and integrate with the infantry battalion HQs in lieu of individual manning which is the current course of action.

**ISSUE #5:** Focusing primarily on VSO tasks when conducting PMT at both Combat Training Centers (CTC) and home stations

DISCUSSION: Most of the infantry battalions tasked with conducting VSO spent more time training on their unit's Mission Essential Task List (METL) during PMT than VSO. CF wasted valuable time training mainly on their unit's METL during PMT that could have been dedicated to VSO academics and task training to include studying the "VSO and ALP Handbook", training on working with and through indigenous forces, and on living in and around local villages which require understanding the Afghan culture, language, and, human dynamics. Most squad leaders did not receive instruction on VSO prior to deployment.



OBSERVATIONS:

- *“The first time I learned about doing VSO was when we arrived in Afghanistan. We spent all of our training time on mounted infantry operations with most of our training at NTC [National Training Center] doing infantry brigade level missions. We were not prepared to conduct this mission”* – Interview with Infantry Squad Leader conducting VSO with SOF at COP
- *“Sir, all we knew was that we were deploying to Afghanistan to work with SOF, but we weren’t told what exactly we would be doing.”* – Interview with additional Infantry Squad Leader conducting VSO with SOF at FOB
- *“In order to gain a true appreciation for the challenges of the VSO, squads should live on small camps during the CTC rotation and interact with ODAs role-played by OPFOR. This would force the companies and the task force to address the challenges of their disposition in theatre.”* – TF Balkh/1-30<sup>th</sup> IN First Look AAR (1.0)
- *“Designate the “VSO/ALP Handbook” as required reading for personnel, especially leadership (from squad through battalion) assigned the VSO mission.”* – TF 1-Panther RSO&I 70-Day First Look Report
- *“The soldier training program was oriented on theater requirements rather than conditions existing at the VSO site...”* – TF-Iron Ranger RSOI 90-Day Rollup

RECOMMENDATION: CF units deploying to conduct VSO with SOF must train primarily on tasks that support VSO. CF can conduct baseline METL task training at their home station, but should find ways to append VSO tasks to become combat mission focused. Infantry battalions that are scheduled for CTC rotations must train on VSO specific tasks and not participate in infantry/armor METL training that is not in support of VSO. VSO academics must also be studied and understood by all forces involved, down to at least the squad leader level. The squad leader then must teach his soldiers the basics of VSO.

**ISSUE #6:** Adhering to all SOF TTPs/SOPs in conducting VSO

DISCUSSION: CF infantry battalions force their soldiers to adhere to conventional Army standards while deployed with SOF which conflicts with SOF TTPs/SOPs in conducting VSO, such as operating SOF-specific vehicles and equipment and adhering to relaxed grooming standards. Conventional leaders fear that their soldiers will struggle with assimilating back into the conventional Army based on their combat experience with SOF and that discipline will erode from following all of SOF TTPs/SOPs. CF not following SOF TTPs/SOPs, has caused disruption and division between the CF and their Afghan partners.

OBSERVATIONS:

- *“Some of the Infantry battalion leadership expressed their concern that their soldiers will not be able to turn off ‘SOFisms’ when back at home station in CONUS, so they decided not to follow certain validated SOPs even though they have been made aware that decision degrades the mission.” – Interview with AOB leadership*
- *“CF really serves two masters, we are OPCON to CFSOCC-A, yet we still maintain ties to our parent unit back home of whom desires that we maintain Army standards.” – Interview with CF Officer*
- *“Partnering Afghans disregard the CF soldiers who look different because they do not wear beards and only go through SOF. This lessens CF credibility and worse, it potentially makes them a target when on mission.” – Interview with AOB leadership*
- *“It is difficult to build rapport with the ANASF because they know we are not SOF since we are the non-bearded guys. Our [conventional] leadership worries that our younger soldiers will have a hard time fitting back in to the regular army.” – Interview with Infantry Squad Leader conducting VSO with SOF at FOB*
- *“Integrate means integrate, so the CF attached to us must do everything we do that the mission dictates. The last thing they [CF leadership] should be afraid of is losing control of their soldiers.” – Interview with AOB leadership*
- *“CF resort to doing what they know and are comfortable with, I even overheard one staff officer say, ‘we’re getting back to the Mech[anized] way of doing things.’” – Interview with AOB leadership*

RECOMMENDATION: CF assigned to SOF units conducting VSO must follow all TTPs/SOPs of the SOF unit. Examples of SOF TTPs/SOPs to which CF must adhere include SOF vehicle and equipment usage and relaxed grooming standards. Integration equates to assimilation as far as the SOF team on the ground determines. Trust between CF and SOF is imperative and diversions from TTP/SOPs may directly decrease CF morale, hamper mission success, and endanger lives.

**Conclusion**

CF and SOF integration has shown to be effective in conducting VSO, however, opportunity exists for improvement. Commanders and decision makers should immediately implement the recommendations offered in this lessons learned compilation. Prior to units deploying and/or while conducting VSO:

- FORSCOM/Army G3 should select only Light Infantry units since they best replicate a SOF unit. They must also coordinate with USASFC to align deployment schedules and PMT.

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- CJSOTF-A must assigned an adequate number of SOF advisers to the Infantry battalion HQs performing as a SOTF. They should consider requesting an ODB from USASFC to train, deploy, and integrate with the Infantry Battalion HQs in lieu of individual manning which is the current course of action.
- The selected Infantry Battalion leadership must screen their subordinate leaders and soldiers to ensure qualified personnel are chosen to conduct VSO with SOF and reassign the at-risk soldiers. They must also focus PMT primarily on VSO tasks and allow their subordinate units to follow all SOF TTPs/SOPs.

It is critical for both SOF and CF to make the necessary adjustments to strengthen the capacity of the mission for now and into the future.

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<sup>i</sup> VSO are a range of planned activities designed to stabilize a village and connect it to formal governance at the district and provincial levels by facilitating infrastructure development. Stability comes from a bottom-up, grass-roots mobilization of Afghans that establish and maintain security, development, and governance in a rural environment. Two outward signs of stability are an absence of violence and disorder and a return to traditional local governance through the *Shura* – CJSOTF-A, “VSO and ALP: Bottom-Up Counterinsurgency,” April 1, 2011, 7. SOF and CF, along with Afghan National Army Special Forces (ANASF), live in and among the villages in order to partner with the Afghan people to assist them in protecting themselves.

<sup>ii</sup> ALP is a part of VSO that creates a mechanism for local security in rural areas that lack sufficient ANSF presence. The ALP is a local Afghan force overseen by the Ministry of the Interior (MoI) that will establish security within their village and district - CJSOTF-A, “VSO and ALP: Bottom-Up Counterinsurgency,” 23-24.

<sup>iii</sup> Dave O’Hearn, Damon Robins, and Aaron Sessoms, “Flattening the Learning Curve: SOF as the Supported Command in the Irregular Warfare Environment,” Naval Postgraduate School Master’s Thesis, June 2012.

<sup>iv</sup> A VSP is a task organized USSOF team with enablers which is embedded in a village or village cluster with the primary task of conducting VSO in order to enhance security, development, and governance. VSPs may or may not have ALP forces - CJSOTF-A, “VSO and ALP: Bottom-Up Counterinsurgency,” 9.

<sup>v</sup> CJSOTF-A, “VSO and ALP: Bottom-Up Counterinsurgency,” 75.

<sup>vi</sup> VSCC-North is responsible for coordinating national and provincial level development and governance resources and actors in support of VSO in RC-North.

<sup>vii</sup> Dan Madden, Rand Corporation, CFSOCC-A CIG, “The Evolution of Precision Counterinsurgency: A History of Village Stability Operations & the Afghan Local Police,” June 30, 2011, 8.

<sup>viii</sup> Meeting with former COMCJSOTF-A, July 27, 2011, DDSO, Pentagon, Washington, DC.

<sup>ix</sup> U.S. Army and U.S. Special Operations Command, “2012 Service Talks,” February, 2012.

<sup>x</sup> Due to ARFORGEN, it may not always be feasible to select only Light Infantry Battalions, however, based on analysis and lessons learned, they are the optimal choice.