**Lessons Learned Review**

**Cultural Support Teams**

**Prepared for:**

**Combined Forces Special Operations**

**Component Command – Afghanistan**

**Commander's Initiative Group**

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1. **Background**. The culture and society of the Afghanistan population has a male-dominant orientation that can prevent interactions with females by male nonrelatives—especially, foreign males. This cultural barrier often becomes a limitation for US Special Operations Forces (SOF) implementing the Village Stability Operations (VSO) strategy. Successful VSO requires engaging the local males and females at the village level in an enduring manner to build community resilience against the insurgency, support for Afghan Local Police (ALP), and relationships with the Government of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan (GIRoA). To enable VSO, the US Special Operations Command (USSOCOM) directed SOF Service components to develop and prepare Cultural Support Teams (CST) comprised entirely of US military female members. After recruitment, CST training began in November 2010 followed by their January 2011 deployment into theater. This paper reviews 64 submitted CST observations, insights, and lessons (OIL) available in the Joint Lessons Learned Information System (JLLIS) - SOF repository covering the November predeployment training and subsequent theater operations lessons submitted from January through July 2011.

2. **Analysis**. The USSOCOM J7/9-LL (Learning and Education Division Lessons Learned Branch) examined the CST OILs and used an eight-step process to categorize, tag, and index the information presented. These analytical steps developed an informational array of the OILs allowing the consolidation of separate pieces of information into a cohesive framework to support an integrated analysis. Figure 1 lists the category factors used in the indexing process for the analysis.

**Figure 1. Categorize, Tag, and Index Factors**

3. **OIL Demographics Overview**. Figure 2 provides a graphic display of the results, and the discussions of CST specific insights gleaned follow this overview. The review indicates the US Army sourced the CST majority for deployed SOF teams. In regards to SOF Core Activities, it was roughly a 60-40 split between Security Force Assistance (SFA) and OTHER lessons. The SFA lessons reflected CST activities in a ground (operational) environment in Afghanistan while the OTHER lessons denoted a predeployment training environment. Based upon the lesson's review, the primacy, i.e., ownership, of the possible remedial responses indicate an almost equal split between SOF and the US Army.

**Figure 2. CST Results Overview**

4. **Specific Results**.

 a. Predeployment Training Insights. Thirty-one CST soldiers graduated from the Special Warfare Course (SWC) CST familiarization training class 001-11 in December 2010. The SOF training cadre and CST training participants provided the following insights concerning the program of instruction (POI).

 (1) The cadre and CST participants both agree individual physical fitness capabilities was the leading concern. The cadre noted numerous soldiers failed the Army Physical Fitness Test (APFT) during selection process and POI. According to the cadre, the fault for the APFT failures stems from the home station leadership failing to enforce the established CST Program prerequisite standards and allowing soldiers to report to CST training without taking a for-the-record diagnostic APFT. Consequently, some CST members were unable to maintain the running pace and the physically demanded course activities challenged them. Participants for CST training echoed the cadre's point and agreed physical fitness was an overarching concern for them.

 (2) Basic Soldier Skills. The cadre could not assume CST training participants had a good grasp of basic soldier skills such as tactical knowledge, situational awareness abilities, and fire team, squad or platoon movements.

 i. By law, CST females are not in the combat arms military occupational skills (MOS) career field. Consequently, they have limited tactical experience and field craft. Many CST training participants did not have a suitable experience level to assemble their personal equipment. For example, the cadre noted the CST training participants had issues with wearing and adjusting their load-carrying equipment, installing body armor plates, and emplacing batteries for night vision goggles.

 ii. Aside from the daily physical fitness requirements, CST training participants also remarked the combat conditioning demands while in full gear (rucksack, body armor, weapon, helmet, etc.) was extremely challenging. The CST training participants at times struggled to keep the tactical movement pace while applying noise discipline in full combat gear.

 iii. The CST training participants were not as familiar or trained with the M9 pistol or M4 carbine as their combat arms counterparts. The CST POI intended focus was on basic marksmanship and not advance weapons training. During training, the cadre quickly acknowledged the CST training participants required advance training because of their limited weapons experience. The cadre added full M9 and M4 instructional modules to the POI and had to decrease the amount of weapons range time as a training time tradeoff. While the CST training participants appreciated the advance weapons training, they also felt they needed extended range time to be comfortable with the M4 Carbine and M9 pistol. The CST training participants suggested extending the POI's weapons qualification training block of instruction.

 (3) CST training participants expressed a need for more intelligence training. Specifically, they suggest adding more Tactical Questioning/Battlefield Interrogation (TQ/BIT) practical exercises. These practical exercises helped them to train and gain enhanced skills and experience to engage noncompliant females, hysterical females, disruptive children, and distressed babies.

 b. VSO CST Operational Insights.

 (1) Passive Intelligence. It is common for villagers to misinterpret the CST female-engagement efforts as intelligence work. CST members need to be aware of this misperception to respond properly. If the CST does not dissuade the misperception, CSTs report they will struggle in their primary engaging the local female role and possibly degrade their supporting VSO effectiveness. This is a delicate balance for the CST members to maintain especially if the CST receives unsolicited and time sensitive information regarding insurgency activities.

 (2) Rapport. Previously CST reported it is easier to build relationships and rapport with the local women when linking engagements to women’s clinics, medical seminars, and other village medical outreach programs. It is helpful for the CST to have more than the standard medical training prior to arriving in country. Providing advanced medical skills to the CST is an enabler and allows them to more effectively support medical personnel as well as facilitate their relationship building with the local female population. Additionally, advanced human interaction skills training can provide the CSTs with enhanced skills to initiate, develop, and cultivate relationships.

 (3) Cultural Awareness. Cultural awareness is a critically important knowledge insight for the CST to have *before* deployment into theater. The Western equality standard between men and women is neither understood nor acceptable in many tribal cultures making it a fine line for CST members to maintain their military bearing and personal security. CST members need to be aware that the difference between a successful engagement and failure is a thin line since Western mores are easily misunderstood and can lead to an unintended insult. The follow are cultural awareness insights recommended for inclusion into future CST training.

 i. CST members, without realizing it, project intimidating presences because of their military postures, uniforms, and equipment. When possible, CST members should strive to project nonthreatening demeanors. This may require additional awareness training such as learning to sit in a non-defensive posture.

 ii. Village women tend to congregate and form large groups around the CST. When dealing with women groups it is a cultural norm for the older women to *speak* for the group. This makes it difficult for CST members to promote uninhibited conversation because most village women have an inherent reluctance to speak openly in front of unrelated women and children. The reluctance to speak freely even occurs in a clinical setting as long as other women and children are in the clinic and within earshot. It will challenge the CST to solicit opinions and information from the younger women.

 iii. Village women will not speak freely if any males—children included—are presence. CST members reported distracting male children away from the female village elders created opportunities to promote free speech between the women. It is important for CST members to be aware that it is a cultural norm for male children to report to their fathers what their mothers are saying to the CST. Therefore, it is a best practice for the CST to operate in a two-person team; one CST member to interact with the children to allow the other to have an inhibited conversation with the woman.

 iv. CST members need to refrain from taking photographs of the village women because camera use creates an unnecessary operational barrier that may lead to restrictive access to the women. Previous CSTs reported even when village males are helpful in allowing access to their women, if they see cameras—whether or not used—dissuaded them from allowing open access to the women and children. Afghan officials stressed the villages have a well-founded fear of insurgent reprisals and village males do not want the pictures to provoke retaliation against their women and children.

 c. Other Insights.

 (1) SOF units report positive and improved VSO activities when augmented by CSTs. Female CSTs enrich the operations rapport within the village by engaging the local women and children leading to improved VSO development efforts.

 (2) During operations other than VSO, SOF units also report improved mission success if CST members are available to assist in site sensitive exploitation activities. CST members have the capacity to connect to the local women and possibly obtain time sensitive information. Female CST members improve cordon and search operations effectiveness with additional preparation such as preplanned questions, type of information to obtain, and operational intent.

 (3) One of the concerns coming from SOF units is the lack of tactical preparedness and experience by the CST. Since there is no permanent CST organization, volunteers come from conventional and SOF units to build the CST. While CSTs do have predeployment training provided by SOF cadre, they lack specific tactical training due in part to their noncombat arms MOS specialty. This is a deficient skill area requiring a solution if CSTs are going to become standardized.

 (4) The majority of CST members are young. This can present a cultural issue when interacting with the village women. Age is an important factor and it is a cultural norm for younger women to defer to their elders. It can be an unintended negative barrier in relationship building for young female CST members. When staffing CSTs, the Service and SOF leadership need to consider building CSTs with a balance of age and maturity.

 (5) The current process has CST members assigned to specific units prior to SWC CST course assessment. The unit assignment process needs to consider the SWC CST training assessment, cadre recommendation for CST selection, and needs of the respective units before building CSTs. It is also just as important to synchronize the CST's deployment schedule with the supporting SOF unit's deployment. When possible, interactive predeployment training should take place to allow the units to integrate fully. Consider attaching the CST to the supported SOF unit to refine predeployment unit cohesion, streamline reporting requirements, and establish administrative requisites.

5. **Conclusion**. The general opinion from SOF units using CSTs is that they are a mission success enabler. As the CST program is still relatively young, there are training, assigning, and synchronizing challenges that still require tweaks and resolutions. If the CST program is to expand into a worldwide, deployable permanent organization, it will require Service and SOF senior leadership to come to composition, assignment, and doctrine agreements.

6. For additional information on the CST lessons used for this analysis, navigate to JLLIS-SOF on the SIPRNET ([*http://www.jllis.smil.mil/ussocom*](http://www.jllis.smil.mil/ussocom)).  After logging into JLLIS-SOF, click this link [CST FET](http://www.jllis.smil.mil/ussocom/index.cfm?disp=binder.cfm&doit=view&binderid=4845) for access to the complete OIL listing located in JLLIS-SOF Binder 4845.

7. Point of contact for additional information on this analysis is Dr. James Knowles, 813-826-0520 (DSN 299).