Lessons of a Coalition Partner in Afghanistan 2002-2013

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THIS IS THE ERA of the Afghan generation for the New Zealand Defence Force. Apart from substantial contributions in the Sinai, Timor Leste, and the Solomon Islands, members of the New Zealand Defence Force generally consider Afghanistan to be its premier international military commitment since 9/11. Moreover, Afghanistan is the main theater of operations for New Zealand Defense Forces. New Zealand has supported the coalition in Afghanistan since 2002. Unlike partners from the United States, the United Kingdom, and Australia, the New Zealand Defense Force has not experienced a sizeable commitment to Iraq.[1]

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An Afghan man walks hand-in-hand with his daughter along the main street of a Bamyan bazaar, March 2013. (Cpl. Sam Shepherd, Royal New Zealand Air Force)

Army officers in any theater harbor within the back pages of their field notebooks lessons worthy of consideration by others. These are lessons learned from experience rather than academic study. In Afghanistan, certain lessons consistently have emerged as essential to the effectiveness of New Zealand Defense Force operations—and possibly to the operations of coalition partners now and in the future. Future counterinsurgency (COIN) and stability missions likely will be similar to the costly but worthy efforts in Afghanistan in the past decade. Therefore, broad lessons such as these, when proven over time, should lead to improvements to military education and training.

New Zealand Defense Forces in Bamyam Province

For New Zealand Defence Force operations in Afghanistan, the largest contribution—in terms of number of personnel and continuity over time—has been to the Afghan people of the Bamyan province. Afghanistan comprises 33 provinces and a multitude of cultures not necessarily limited to the borders of Afghanistan.

The Bamyan Province is distinctive, in part, because of its predominantly Hazaran population. Across South Asia and the Middle East, this province is considered the Hazaran heartland. Bamyan is isolated geographically from other population groups because it resides within the Hindu Kush, a long mountain range in southwest Asia. Most Hazaran people actively pursue a peaceful existence for themselves and their children. Hence, the military casualties in Bamyan over a decade, while regrettable, were many fewer than those in other provinces: about 20 members of the Afghan National Security Force and eight New Zealand Defence Force personnel lost their lives.

The New Zealand Defence Force led the provincial reconstruction team (PRT) in Bamyan continuously from 2003 to 2013, mainly with New Zealand Army units—more than 3,500 New Zealand Defence Force personnel served. These are small figures compared with other nations but large for New Zealand forces. From 2003 to 2013, 21 contingents served six- to seven-month rotations.[2]

All New Zealand team members, no doubt, gained valuable insights that contributed to effective mission accomplishment. The ten lessons highlighted for consideration here are dedicated to those who paid the ultimate price while serving in Bamyan.

Lesson 1: Success in contemporary conflict depends on applying counterinsurgency principles and lessons effectively. COIN principles are the new standard for complex problem-solving, for military and civilian efforts. COIN conducted in Afghanistan is the graduate level of contemporary conflict. The New Zealand Defence Force found that all warfighting functions and battlefield operating systems faced significant challenges over the decade of its commitment to Bamyan. This was, in part, because those functions and systems were based on past operations. However, the nature of operations in Afghanistan is significantly different from major conventional operations and two-dimensional conflicts of the past.

New Zealand forces in Afghanistan applied principles, tactics, techniques, and procedures not only from U.S. Army doctrine, but also from British army doctrine. They experienced first-hand the joint, interagency, and multinational aspects of operations described in U.S. Army operational and COIN doctrine. The doctrinal publications used in this author's education and training were published between 2008 and 2010. Though valuable, they were not always adequate to guide operations.

Forces need to seek out lessons learned in Afghanistan and determine how those lessons apply to current operations. Soldiers should resist the temptation to apply established principles by rote because those principles may not account for their situation. They should exercise judgment to determine how they will integrate and synthesize lessons learned with their education and training.

Lesson 2: The long-term success of the host nation frames all phases of military operations.

For a COIN or stabilization mission to be successful, military forces must focus first on the success of the host nation. They must adopt a selfless attitude as they conduct their missions. More specifically, soldiers, leaders, and units must look beyond their own missions and aim to make others successful.

Much current training and education remains rooted in the seize initiative operational phase (phase III of joint operational phases). Experiences in Bamyan showed that if forces focused the majority of their efforts in phase III, they

Provincial chief of police for Bamyan addresses students from Afghan civil and military units attending a combined emergency close air support course facilitated by the Bamyan PRT, February 2013. Healthy cooperation among the coalition, interagency, and intergovernmental stakeholders working within the host nation sets a best practice example for them to emulate. (Squadron Leader Hight, RNZAF).

would fail to grasp the importance of other phases. However, activities such as foreign internal defense, mentoring, and security force assistance—which play an important role in a host nation's long-term success—must be conducted in the shape, stabilize, and enable civil authority phases (phases 0, IV, and V). These activities are becoming the purview not only of the special operations community, but also of general purpose forces. Increased training emphasis on activities in phases 0, IV, and V will set up coalition forces for greater success in future commitments.

Lesson 3: Persistence of commitment requires continuity. Persistence of commitment has numerous implications—in knowledge management, handovers, and enduring relationships, just to name a few. Former Afghan finance minister Dr. Ashraf Ghani, in a July 2012 interview with *COIN Common Sense*, described deficiencies of the International Security Assistance Force's (ISAF's) institutional memory over time.[3] Twenty-one rotations of New Zealand forces to Bamyan caused significant challenges in continuity. The greatest was passing on critical information about past and current operations, including *who*, *what*, *where*, *when*, and *why*.

In eight years, Bamyan's provincial governor had endured at least 16 military commanders. New Zealand forces' ability to manage key relationships over time and maintain information and intelligence data was difficult. Ways to improve continuity include adopting effective database tools and increasing the length of tours for selected individuals.[4]

Lesson 4: Military forces need to build good relationships with stakeholders outside their chain of command. Bamyan bordered four regional commands and no fewer than five different lead nations for PRTs within the eight provinces surrounding it. New Zealand forces learned the importance of not only working within the regional command (east) guidelines and direction, but also of understanding groups to the north, west, and south. (In contrast to coalition military partners, Afghans usually had little concern with boundaries as they appeared on maps.) Nesting efforts within the ISAF joint command's annual and seasonal plans reduced problems, but nothing beat face-to-face meetings and regular communication with neighboring groups. Lateral coordination was as important as vertical.

Lesson 5: Soldiers must be able to exercise initiative at the tactical level consistent with strategic direction. The ability to apply strategic-level guidance directly and quickly at the tactical level extends beyond how leaders normally interpret mission command. Regardless, it was common for units to receive direction or constraints from the highest levels (either within ISAF or from a national level) and within hours apply parts of that direction at the tactical level. Bypassing formal direction from the next higher headquarters rather than waiting for formal orders happened frequently because of time constraints. This is the new reality: to adapt rapidly, forces must rethink the interpretation of mission command in relation to tactical actions. The unofficial term *stractics* expresses a linkage between the strategic direction of a force and its operations at the tactical level.

Lesson 6: Military operations support civil functions. Military leaders must consider how military missions support short- and long-term civil functions, and they must understand those functions. Military missions do not ensure successful stabilization or COIN. Long-term success in Afghanistan depends on effective nonmilitary functions. Lines of effort not traditionally considered military, such as anticorruption, counternarcotics, gender equality, insurgent financial tracking, justice sector development, and reintegration and reconciliation are critical to the success of the Afghan government and military forces.[5]

A corollary to this lesson is that *how* forces conduct a COIN or stability mission can be just as important as the end state. Military missions presumed successful can affect civil functions in a host nation for better or for worse. The process and the means used can have unintended consequences to the host nation (as can the end state). Military missions should not be performed in isolation.

The philosophy of mission command emphasizes allowing subordinates freedom to determine how they will accomplish tasks. In Afghanistan, it became evident that mission command could lead to accomplishment of a military mission that eventually would become detrimental to the civil function it should have supported. Military leaders must consider how their tactics, techniques, and procedures affect partners and the host nation.

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Lesson 7: Military forces should seek unity of purpose among civilian and military partners. Command and control applies to military forces but not necessarily to civil-military partnerships. A simple wiring diagram cannot express the nonlinear relationships common among the numerous stakeholders, let alone assure coordination among them. Unity of effort likely will be impossible because synchronization and integration are so difficult to achieve. Achieving unity of purpose is more pragmatic.[6]

The approximately 250-member Bamyan PRT truly was an interagency and multinational entity. It was common to interact with partners from the United States Agency for International Development, New Zealand Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade, Malaysian Armed Forces, and European Union police daily. Each organization had an independent chain of command extending to a

higher authority. New Zealand forces supported the overarching ISAF mission, goals of the Afghan constitution and national development strategy, and numerous intergovernmental and nongovernmental stakeholders.[7] Balancing the needs, expectations, directions, constraints, and efforts of all stakeholders was challenging but immensely rewarding when often-disparate planets aligned.

Lesson 8: Human factors are as important as other variables. Similar to other coalition partners, New Zealand forces' intelligence preparation of the battlefield tended to focus on terrain and threat factors during its first years in Afghanistan. While these factors were and are important, equally important is the multitude of human factors: military operations are inherently human-centric. Adopting a focus on human factors can represent a challenging mindset shift for soldiers trained over decades to identify the enemy and seize terrain-related objectives. New Zealand forces learned to focus efforts on the Afghan population and the Afghan National Security Force while concurrently neutralizing the insurgency.

Lesson 9: Functions such as information and intelligence are as important as movement and maneuver, fires, and combat service support. Information operations and intelligence functions warrant significant reflection and increased investment for future commitments.[8] Increasing the emphasis on these functions will be a challenge, especially as the depth and breadth of information and intelligence are not widely understood by most. The New Zealand Army is competent in and focused on how it applies maneuver, lethal fires, and combat service support (or sustainment). Current effectiveness and future success depend on adjusting, even revolutionizing, this emphasis.[9]

Lt. Jimmy Martin, Bamyan PRT, meets with Afghan locals at a Bamyan police station in March 2013. A focus on the host nation populace, their perceptions, issues and visions, is an essential take-away for future operations. (Cpl. Sam Shepherd, RNZAF)

Lesson 10: There always is room for improvement. New Zealand forces have developed a culture of continuous improvement. Processes, tools, and resources for review, reflection, and improvement are well established and well used. Numerous discussion forums, after action reviews, periodicals, and other resources make it easy for commanders, staff, and operators at all levels to improve operations. However, there is always room to grow. Individuals and organizations can pursue excellence in the profession of arms through an attitude of continuous improvement. The temptation to rest on one's laurels and avoid self-critique is great. However, no person, organization, custom, system, or idea should be considered exempt from criticism, including the very processes used for improvement.

Conclusion

It is easy to blame perceived deficiencies in military education and training when the situation on the ground bears little resemblance to one's studies. Nonetheless, military education and training, no matter how up-to-date, cannot ensure soldiers are prepared for all situations they will face in the field. Education and training would be truly deficient if they did not prepare soldiers to learn continuously and exercise judgment. This does not remove the need for military education and training to evolve so they meet the needs of current operations. The sharing of lessons learned can contribute to this evolution and increase the likelihood of successful COIN and stabilization. ***MR***

NOTES

1. An austere New Zealand Defence Force military engineering commitment was made toward reconstruction in Iraq from 2003–2004, and the force provides individual United Nations military advisors to Iraq.

2. New Zealand special operations forces have been committed toward Operation Enduring Freedom and ISAF efforts in Afghanistan since October 2001, in one guise or another, and other individual augmentees to various task forces and headquarters have directly contributed toward the coalition mission in Afghanistan.

3. *COIN Common Sense* 3, Issue 2, "The Realist: An Interview With Dr. Ashraf Ghani," July 2012, 7.

4. CALL Handbook no. 11-16, *Afghanistan Provincial Reconstruction Team Handbook*, February 2011, 23, provides a partial solution when it emphasizes the importance of a multi-year "strategy that includes . . . a long term end state goal."

5. See *COIN Common Sense* 1, Issue 3, July 2010, for several examples of these non-traditional efforts.

CALL Reference Guide no. 11-39, *BCT-PRT "Unity of Effort" Reference Guide,* allocates a chapter to approaches, outlining the importance of how tasks are accomplished within the eyes of the host nation.

6. Raymond D. Barrett explores the nature of interagency coordination further in his article "Dynamics of Interagency Teams," *Military Review* (March-April 2013).

7. See Paul Muggleton and Bruce Oswald's occasional paper 5/2011: "Counterinsurgency and Certain Legal Aspects: a Snapshot of Afghanistan," (Asia-Pacific Civil-Military Centre of Excellence, 2011).

8. See Michael T. Flynn and Charles A. Flynn, "Integrating Intelligence and Information; Ten Points for the Commander," *Military Review* (January-February 2012).

9. Fire, move, and sustain functions were heavily emphasized in the New Zealand Army Grade III and Grade II staff and tactics courses, which are compulsory milestones for all first lieutenants and captains as part of their professional military education.