



From Crisis to Campaign

Operation Allies Welcome at Fort Bliss, Texas

Maj. Scott Schultz, U.S. Army

Maj. Anthony Lupo, U.S. Army

The 1st Armored Division (1AD), Department of State, Department of Homeland Security (DHS), and many nongovernmental organizations (NGO) housed and assisted in the resettlement of 11,427 Afghan asylum seekers from August to the end of December 2021 at Fort Bliss, Texas, as part of Operation Allies Welcome (OAW). “Team Bliss” received a no-notice mission born of an active crisis to receive and house asylum seekers until they could be resettled elsewhere in the United States. The 1AD headquarters established an interagency coordination cell at Doña Ana Range Complex, termed Doña Ana Village for the duration of OAW. A plans and operations fusion cell coordinated interagency and NGO efforts under the combined efforts of the deputy commanding general-operations and the deputy commanding general-maneuver (DCGM). This group of officers coordinated the construction of the camp, provided life support to arriving guests, organized arriving volunteer organizations, enabled the interagency team, and influenced national resettlement strategies.

The 1AD planning team developed and executed population-centric operations to provide governance to a city of Afghan guests using elements of contemporary doctrine to successfully complete OAW. First, the team employed Army design methodology to recognize and solve the ambiguous and dynamic challenges presented by the operation. Second, the team enabled the resettlement of the guests at Doña Ana Village by employing aspects of stability operations. Third, the team developed an operational approach and altered the Team Bliss operations process appropriately to match the nature of the operational environment (OE). What follows is a description of how OAW developed over time and how Team Bliss developed its approach to executing the operation.

On the afternoon of Friday, 13 August 2021, 1AD was tasked to receive, house, and process a thousand asylum seekers within three days and a total of ten thousand in ten days. In some respects, 1AD knew just as much from the news as from its higher headquarters.

The staff formed an operational planning team and began planning. Initial planning focused on the imminent task of generating options of where to house the asylum seekers. Options varied and involved tradeoffs with other missions and requirements at Fort Bliss. As planning carried into the night, the staff’s understanding of the mission developed. The scope, scale, and timeline of the operation were unknown because national-level policy was still forming. Rather than think about the long-term implications, the planning team focused on how to construct a temporary home for ten thousand asylum seekers as quickly as possible.

Initially, the team made several assumptions to help guide planning. First, the staff assumed that 1AD would develop the initial plan, execute the opening stages of the operation, and then transition responsibility to a different federal agency. Second, 1AD’s commitment to the operation would be limited in terms of time and scale. These first two assumptions were proven false and eventually elicited a change to the understanding of the operation. Third, housing at scale required a contracted solution. Lastly, the planning team initially considered Operation Allies Refuge, which would change to OAW, as a national-level operation to essentially conduct reception, staging, onward movement, and integration for the asylum seekers where the Department of Defense (DOD) bore responsibility for reception and staging, and other interagency partners were responsible for onward movement and integration into American society. These last two assumptions held generally true throughout the operation.

On Saturday, 14 August, Team Bliss began to take shape as other entities joined 1AD. The Department of State was designated as the lead federal agency, which eventually transitioned to DHS; United States Northern Command led the DOD’s efforts; and U.S. Army North was the Joint Force Land Component Command and 1AD’s higher headquarters. The Fort Bliss garrison team integrated with the 1AD staff and helped the team think through the legal considerations of land use. The deputy commanding general-operations worked with the garrison team to oversee the

Sgt. Margret Poit with 40th Brigade Engineer Battalion, 2nd Armored Brigade Combat Team, 1st Armored Division, interacts with Afghan children at Fort Bliss’s Doña Ana Complex in New Mexico, 11 September 2021. The Department of Defense, through U.S. Northern Command and in support of the Department of Homeland Security, provided transportation, temporary housing, medical screening, and general support for at least fifty thousand Afghan evacuees in secure locations outside Afghanistan. (Photo by Staff Sgt. Michael West, U.S. Army)

massive contracting oversight responsibilities. The DCGM formed an information operations working group focused on media coverage, which eventually grew to encompass other aspects of the operation not related to housing. 1AD leveraged 2nd Brigade to provide forces to receive flights, billet guests, provide basic medical services, and perform mayoral duties at the camp. Myriad NGO and volunteer organizations arrived eager to help as well. Team Bliss grew, shrank, and evolved throughout the operation but the primary structure was set in September.

Upon receipt of mission, the 1AD staff had many more questions than answers. The timeline of the operation, legal status of the guests, security requirements, and applicable operating authorities were unknown or developing. The list of assumptions necessary for planning was extensive and grew at a pace that exceeded the rate of return on requests for information, which were delayed by the fog of operations. Moreover, 1AD—as an armored division—had little resident knowledge or training in the long-term administration of refugee or displaced persons life-support areas besides the general experience of its soldiers and leaders in Afghanistan (an inaccurate model for what was to come). The fact that the mission would occur on U.S. soil meant questions surrounding the legal status of guests would dramatically alter the nature of the camp. The prevailing mental model of “camps” in the American southwest was informed by years of exposure to cross-border migration and bore only superficial similarities to the unfolding crisis.

Given the ambiguity of the problem, the staff pursued Army design methodology and military decision-making process in parallel. “Army design methodology is a methodology for applying critical and creative thinking to understand, visualize, and describe unfamiliar problems and approaches to solving them.”¹ The staff leveraged academic research and NGO (e.g., United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees) best practices to understand the opportunities and threats associated with displaced persons camps. Meanwhile, the staff conducted detailed planning on the imminent problem of breaking ground on a life-support area for ten thousand guests.

Design yielded important outcomes that re-framed the problem and changed the structure and administration of the camp. The team performed a

center-of-gravity analysis that identified, based on several academic studies, that real and perceived injustices were leading causes of instability in displaced person camps. To be successful, Team Bliss and the inter-agency team would need to protect vulnerable populations, ensure criminal activity was prosecuted, and provide transparency on guests’ resettlement statuses. This caused the team to redesign the village while in construction to better account for the protection and comfort of women and children (e.g., reducing generator noise and improving lighting around women’s living spaces, positioning mixed-gender safety posts in high-risk areas, etc.). This understanding upended the mental models preceding it and reformed the operational approach to focus on quality of life and justice concerns first and foremost. The planning team conducted this design analysis early on in OAW, but it took time and for the situation to normalize for the team to develop a deliberate operational approach for executing the mission.

Team Bliss managed OAW in crisis mode for about the first forty days. Work output was high, and the situation remained uncertain as policy decisions eventually trickled down to the resettlement sites. The team generally followed

Maj. Anthony Lupo is a military intelligence officer serving as a brigade S-2 in the 1st Armored Division at Fort Bliss, Texas. He graduated from the U.S. Military Academy in 2010, earned a master’s in philosophy from the University of Saint Andrews in 2011, and completed the command and general staff course in 2021. Lupo previously served with 2nd Infantry Division at Fort Lewis, Washington, and 11th Armored Cavalry Regiment at Fort Irwin, California.

Maj. Scott Schultz is an infantry officer serving as an executive officer in the 1st Brigade Combat Team, 1st Armored Division at Fort Bliss, Texas. He graduated from the U.S. Military Academy in 2009, earned a master’s in public policy from Georgetown University in 2019, and completed the advanced military studies program at the School of Advanced Military Studies in 2021. Schultz previously served with 2nd Cavalry Regiment at Vilseck, Germany, and 1st Brigade Combat Team, 101st Airborne Division (Air Assault) at Fort Campbell, Kentucky.



During Operation Allies Welcome, Doña Ana Village, New Mexico, shown here on 27 October 2021, was established to provide life support, medical services, and other critical functions to about ten thousand Afghan guests. (Photo courtesy of the U.S. Army Mission and Installation Contracting Command)

a battle rhythm that operated twenty-four hours per day, seven days per week, in which senior leaders met several times a day with the staff to receive updates and make decisions. This process was time consuming and somewhat resembled the battle rhythm that the division used during a command post exercise based off the air tasking order cycle. However, the operation was not based on a targeting cycle nor did it last just two weeks. The situation was ambiguous and developing. As a result, Team Bliss found itself, in terms of the operational framework, in the close fight, reacting to each new problem in the near term. In this setting, the staff reacted to each new problem by forming temporary planning teams, whether it pertained to humanitarian aid distribution, housing for guests that required treatment at an actual hospital, or rerouting construction traffic. The rapidly changing environment prohibited the staff from planning for the long term and senior leaders from understanding how the operation was progressing.

The OE changed and the situation matured by early September. Housing construction at Doña Ana Village was complete and ten thousand guests resided

there. The focus of Team Bliss pivoted from encouraging contractors to work rapidly and receiving guests to enabling the interagency team to process guests and to maintain guest goodwill. This transition caused the team to reframe the problem, which then became how to enduringly administer a town of ten thousand. A few factors influenced this change to the understanding of the OE. Due to a measles outbreak at one of the other OAW sites, the team learned of a policy that mandated guests remain at Doña Ana Village for twenty-one days after receiving a measles, mumps, and rubella vaccine. This was the first of many unanticipated obstacles that led to the realization that OAW might endure until mid-to-late 2022. This recognition had several other implications. Leaders and staff members were operating at an unsustainable rate, treating each new problem as novel, and using significant amounts of energy developing unique solutions. Team Bliss did not have the ability nor authority to influence the guest resettlement process and certainly would not accelerate it. The team realized that it would need to manage the risks of the operation more deliberately to enable senior

leaders to think about the long-term future of the operation, organize and employ resources more efficiently, and solve more complex problems through deliberate and detailed planning that provided opportunities for leader inputs.

The DCGM directed the creation of a population-centric campaign plan coupled with a campaign management plan to complete the mission based on the new understanding of the OE. As a foreign officer from the British army, he used the terms “campaign plan” and “campaign management plan” to refer to altering the operational approach and operations process. First, doctrine defines an operational approach as a broad description of the activities the force must take to transform the current conditions into those desired at end state.² An operational approach results as the outcome of defining the current state, the desired future state, and the problem to be solved. Using this general process, the Team Bliss planners developed an operational approach with six lines of effort to administer a village while guests underwent the interagency-led resettlement process justly and efficiently. Second, the operations process is comprised of the major command and control activities performed during operations: planning, preparing, executing, and continuously assessing the operation.³ The Team Bliss planners altered the process appropriately for the interagency and NGO partners to enable senior leader decision-making and execute the operation until its completion.

The planning team returned to the design and center of gravity analysis it conducted earlier in the operation to generate a deliberate operational approach. Doctrine accounted for the situation “as planning time becomes available during execution, commander’s initiate Army design methodology to reframe their understanding of the OE and associated problems modify the plan as required.”⁴ The team already identified that improving guest quality of life and securing vulnerable populations as enduring priorities within the operational approach to achieve the desired future state of maintaining guest goodwill while they remained at Doña Ana Village. The next steps involved converting this conceptual approach into tangible actions and efforts. To do this, the planning team considered the stability tasks and mechanisms as an existing framework. The stability tasks outline the necessary actions to stabilize an area and to interact with a population and characterized the types of actions

Team Bliss needed to take to secure the population and facilitate a form of governance.⁵ Additionally, the stability mechanisms described the primary methods that Team Bliss would have to use to create the conditions for the desired future state.⁶ The stability tasks and mechanisms provided a baseline conceptual framework that helped create a shared understanding of the nature of the operations for Team Bliss. However, stability operations doctrine did not characterize the OAW OE in a few key respects. Mainly, OAW occurred within the United States, and Team Bliss was working with other American federal agencies rather than a foreign host government. DOD efforts to support governance and restore essential services were in essence actions on behalf of the American government for the American government because the United States was the host nation. Nevertheless, stability doctrine provided a starting point and guiderail for how Team Bliss eventually developed a plan to accomplish its mission.

The campaign plan provided the way to execute the operational approach and link the current state to the desired state, the stated purpose of operational art.⁷ This involved using the commander’s guidance to arrange efforts of the team. Given the population-centric operational approach and the stability-centric nature of the mission, the team used lines of effort (LOE) to logically link tasks, effects, and conditions.⁸ LOE logically links multiple tasks using the logic of purpose rather than geographical reference to focus efforts toward establishing a desired end state.⁹ The planning team generated six LOE. These were processing; safety, security, and welfare; health; infrastructure; information and integration; and sustainment. The processing LOE sought to enable interagency partners to design, refine, and deliver an end-to-end processing operation to efficiently process guests through arrivals, assurances, preparation for movement, and transportation to resettlement agencies. The safety, security, and welfare LOE aimed to protect all personnel from environmental hazards and human security threats while enabling interagency processing and facilitating safe access to services provided at Doña Ana Village. The health LOE pursued delivering sustained medical operations including case processing while enabling the overall public health, physical and mental care of the population in preparation for life as a U.S. citizen. The infrastructure LOE focused on building, improving, and maintaining Doña Ana Village

for ten thousand guests and to ensure it continued to meet the needs of guests, service members, and partners for the duration of the mission. The information and integration LOE sought to design and deliver an engagement, influence, and communication plan focused on guests, interagency team, and external audiences. Lastly, the sustainment LOE aimed to sustain all other LOEs, the guests, service members, and partners with all classes of supply and deliver efficient contract management and procurement processes. The 1AD senior leaders approved them and assigned subordinate leaders to oversee and facilitate execution of these efforts over time. The division planners remained committed to supporting OAW by performing integrating functions between the LOEs, developing contingency branches and sequels, and facilitating the campaign management plan. After developing the plan, the planning team presented it to the interagency leaders and gained their consensus before implementing it. Ultimately, the campaign plan improved integration and achieved a sustainable tempo.

In addition to introducing a new logic to OAW, the campaign plan enabled the team to better manage time and enable senior leader decision-making. The team managed time more deliberately by using the structure of the campaign plan to reduce the tempo of OAW's execution. Tempo is the relative speed and rhythm of military operations over time with respect to the enemy.¹⁰ In this case there was no enemy per se, and tempo related to the rhythm of operations, specifically the frequency of activities and duration of the operation. For the first six weeks, Team Bliss operated at a very high frequency, executing a battle rhythm that occurred every day without variance. As the duration of the operation increased, the team eventually found the frequency of events unsustainable. The team was operating in the near-term and needed to reduce the frequency of events to sustain the operation for the long term. The planners reduced operational tempo by extending the decision-making cycle over the course of a week rather than a day. This change was intended to achieve several effects. First, it provided the staff and LOE leads time to plan deliberately, essentially using the military decision-making process vice rapid decision-making process as appropriate. Second, it provided senior leaders with time to understand and visualize the operation, envision solutions, and issue broad guidance to the planning team. Third, it allowed the

planning team to present options to senior leaders with enough time to alter plans based on changes in the OE. Last, it provided predictability to the staff about when it needed to present leaders with plans, increased flexibility to manage efforts, and provided time to recover personally. These conditions enabled a new rhythm for the operation.

The campaign plan enabled more predictable interagency senior leader decision-making by scheduling deliberate decision-making events and delegating authority for decisions. 1AD senior leaders granted authority and responsibility to LOE leads. The LOE leads were empowered to develop their own milestones and manage their portfolios to accomplish the commander's intent. These LOE leads reviewed the progress of their efforts once a week during a joint planning board, which covered a different LOE each day. The joint planning board was chaired by the DCGM who rendered mid-level decisions beyond the authority of the LOE leads but below the threshold of the interagency senior leaders. This structure allowed lower- and mid-level leaders to solve issues at the lowest levels, to screen issues requiring higher deliberation, and to receive iterative feedback from mid-level leaders. This saved the time of senior leaders and allowed the situation to develop before they made key decisions. Senior leaders met daily to synchronize their external communications, to discuss guidance from higher headquarters, and to make decisions on issues not requiring deliberate planning. Senior leaders considered long-term issues and deliberate planning efforts during a weekly campaign management board. The change to the pattern of operations and implementation of the deliberate decision-making cycle reduced the operational tempo and increased the sustainability of executing OAW.

Implementing the new operational approach and reducing the operation's tempo improved the management of the operation, but it did not preclude additional challenges from arising. Nor did implementing the campaign plan occur as intended. The 1AD plans shop remained fully committed to supporting the execution of OAW. Rather than focusing on just long-term plans, the shop's efforts were split between augmenting the LOE leads, overcoming emergent near-term challenges, facilitating the campaign management plan, and leading discrete planning efforts as an integrating cell. Difficulty arose in transitioning responsibilities between the plans

shop and the 1AD tactical headquarters (DTAC). Doctrine distinguishes responsibilities between the plans, future operations, and current operations cells.¹¹ However, 1AD leaders elected to deviate from doctrine and leverage the plans shop to plan and execute in all three temporal horizons. The DTAC would have normally overseen the execution of the operations developed by the plans shop, but in OAW, the DTAC primarily provided the common operating picture, collected and processed data, reported to the Joint Force Land Component Command, and coordinated with the interagency team. Unintended consequences occurred as a result. Oftentimes, the DTAC's and plans team's understanding of the operation were desynchronized. There was also little structural redundancy in the case a single planner was absent from the operation.

The last challenge in implementing the campaign plan was assessing the operation. Initially, the team intended to assess metrics associated with each LOE to determine whether the operation was proceeding as anticipated. However, the lack of quantitative data and uncertainty of the duration of the operation prohibited objective assessments. The team did make subjective assessments that were helpful to adjusting the campaign based on the developing OE.

The OE continued to evolve after the campaign plan was implemented. Over time, guests began to depart, but the rate of their departure remained outside of DOD and local interagency team member control. In support of DHS, Team Bliss made repeated attempts to accelerate guest departures but

were generally unsuccessful. The lack of successes reinforced the validity of the initial center of gravity analysis and the operational approach. Team Bliss's primary objective remained to improve quality of life and secure vulnerable guests as the overall guest population decreased and the footprint consolidated. The emphasis on maintaining a safe and secure environment, providing essential services until the end of the operation, and informing guests of reasoning behind actions that affected their lives maintained their good will. They were understanding and accommodating until they departed. Team Bliss succeeded by understanding operational challenges and overcoming them with sustaining and shaping efforts appropriate for the situation. Design methodology aided the team to identify the right problems to solve to achieve the desired future state and accomplish the mission. Stability tasks and mechanisms provided the basic framework for the team to generate a conceptual operational approach. Employing elements of operational art facilitated the team's conversion of the conceptual operational approach into discrete actions and enduring efforts that enabled the operations process to occur. OAW at Doña Ana Village was successful because all of Team Bliss endeavored to aid the asylum seekers after the crucible of escaping Afghanistan. Although challenging, the soldiers, civilians, volunteers, and contractors converted the crisis that began in August into a successful campaign by the time the operation concluded in December. ■

Notes

1. Army Techniques Pamphlet (ATP) 5-0.1, *Army Design Methodology* (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Publishing Office [GPO], July 2015), 1-3.

2. *Ibid.*, 5-1.

3. Army Doctrinal Pamphlet (ADP) 5-0, *The Operations Process* (Washington, DC: U.S. GPO, July 2019), vi.

4. ATP 5-0.1, *Army Design Methodology*, 2-2.

5. ADP 3-0, *Operations* (Washington, DC: U.S. GPO, July 2019), 2-5. The six primary stability tasks are establish civil security, establish civil control, restore essential services, support governance, support economic and infrastructure development, and conduct security cooperation.

6. *Ibid.* "A stability mechanism is the primary method through which friendly forces affect civilians to attain

conditions that support establishing a lasting, stable peace. ... The four stability mechanisms are compel, control, influence, and support."

7. *Ibid.*, 2-1. "Operational art is the cognitive approach that commanders and their staffs—supported by their skill, knowledge, experience, creativity, and judgment—to develop strategies, campaigns, and operations to organize and employ military forces by integrating ends, ways, and means."

8. *Ibid.*, 2-8.

9. *Ibid.*

10. *Ibid.*

11. Field Manual 6-0, *Commander and Staff Organization and Operations* (Washington, DC: U.S. GPO, May 2014), 1-8.