



U.S. Army Sgt. Lidya Admounabdfany writes down information from a local woman at the Woman's Center near the Zhari District Center outside of Forward Operating Base Pasab, Kandahar Province, Afghanistan, Dec. 17, 2011. Admounabdfany is a member of 3rd Brigade, 10th Mountain Division's female engagement team (FET), and is gathering information from women so the FET can distribute blankets and winter clothing to the women and their families. (U.S. Army photo by Spc. Kristina Truluck, 55th Signal Company)

## Female Engagement Teams

*By Warrant Officer Class One Raymond T. Kareko*

International Military Student Office, U.S. Army Sergeants Major Academy

**A** casket draped in the U.S. flag is loaded onto a horse-drawn hearse in the small township of Randolph, Ohio. The solemn procession comes to its final stop at the local cemetery. At the conclusion of the condolences, the firing of volleys completes and the last notes of taps echo around the gravestones. A lone Soldier presents a perfectly folded flag to the grieving husband and salutes. A family and nation mourn as an-

other Soldier is laid to rest during the war on terrorism. The young Soldier buried on October 31, 2011, was 1st Lt. Ashley White Strumpf, the first Special Forces cultural support team member killed in combat (Albrecht, 2019; Patria et al., 2015).

This article will explore the history of female engagement teams in combat and their role in today's military.

*“We could find the terrorists [that the Rangers] were going after much quicker, and we were much more accurate usually because the women and children knew what was going on in the community... I think [the Rangers’] mindset shifted very quickly to us being an asset and not a liability.”*

—Cultural support team member supporting 75th Ranger Regiment (Tracey, 2016, para. 46)

## Counterinsurgency (COIN)

In the *U.S. Government Counterinsurgency Guide*, Kilcullen, Porter, and Burgos (2009) define insurgency as “the organized use of subversion and violence to seize, nullify or challenge political control of a region” (p.2). It is a political struggle, where both sides use force to gain space for their political, economic, and influential activities to be effective (Kilcullen, Porter, & Burgos, 2009).

According to *Joint Publication 3-24: Counterinsurgency* (2018):

*“An effective COIN operation will utilize all instruments of national power to integrate and synchronize political, security, legal, economic, development, and psychological activities carried out by the HN [host nation] and applicable USG [United States Government] and multinational partners to create a holistic approach aimed at weakening the insurgents while simultaneously bolstering the government’s legitimacy in the eyes of the contested population. (Department of Defense, p. 1-2)”*



U.S. Army Sgt. Leighmarie Lawless, a member of a female engagement team, talks with several children in a village in the Deh Yak district, Afghanistan, Oct. 19, 2011. (U.S. Army Photo by Sgt. Ken Scar)

Following the initial success of U.S. and Afghan forces in overthrowing the Taliban regime in 2001, in the spring and summer of the following year, Taliban and other elements began to conduct an offensive to overthrow the Afghan government and coerce the withdrawal of U.S. and coalition forces (“The U.S. War in Afghanistan,” n.d.).

Gen. David Petraeus, commander of the 101st Airborne Division, resurrected the COIN strategy in Iraq and achieved success with the population-centric tactic in Mosul. He would later adopt the same COIN strategy when he commanded troops in Afghanistan (Bergen, 2012).

## Female Engagement Teams

In a COIN environment, the population is the center of gravity. By winning the support of the population, and not just simply killing the enemy, insurgent forces can be thoroughly defeated and exiled from the region from both military forces and the local populace (Coll, 2012). One achievement of the U.S.’ population-focused strategy in Afghanistan has been the development of specialized teams tasked with engaging local communities. One such team is the female engagement team (FET), developed in 2009 to achieve access to Afghan

females, a previously untouchable segment of half the Afghan population, as any interaction with men outside of their families is considered culturally inappropriate (Pottinger, Jilani, & Russo, 2010).

Because of cultural sensitivities that prevented military men from searching or interacting with local women, they became a smuggling and terrorist loophole that insurgents exploited (Beals, 2010). In the early 2000s, the U.S. Marine Corps was first to identify and mitigate this issue by creating Task Force Lioness, teams of female Marines who implemented culturally sensitive search methods to deter the enemy from using women to conduct terrorist attacks and smuggling operations (Katt, 2014). By 2005, both the Army and Marine Corps trained and employed Lioness teams. “The creation of Lioness teams mitigated the security limitation identified at the control points and allowed an acceptable means of searching the local female populace” (Beals, 2010, p. 5).



A female Afghan Uniformed Police officer reads over a handout on weak areas when searching a female detainee during a training event at Camp Nathan Smith in Kandahar City, Afghanistan, March 28, 2011. The handout was part of a class taught by a female engagement team with the 58th Military Police Company attached to 1st Squadron, 10th Cavalry Regiment, 2nd Brigade Combat Team, 4th Infantry Division. (U.S. Army photo by Spc. Kristina Truluck, 55th Signal Company)

## Evolution

By 2008, in Iraq, the female search operations conducted by the Lioness teams were transferred over to local Iraqi females. While in Afghanistan at this time, the first FETs were stood up and attached to infantry units. Unlike the Lioness teams, whose main focus was searching females, FETs' missions included "searching women at polling sites and check points, running medical clinics, distribution of over-the-counter medicines, distribution of humanitarian aid, and conducting engagements in Afghan homes" (Beals, 2010, p. 12).

In 2010, because of the success of the Lioness teams and FETs, U.S. Special Operations Command recruited and trained their first women for what became cultural support teams (CSTs). These women were not only trained in humanitarian and search procedures, like their predecessors, but also in combat operations in order to "deploy alongside Green Berets on Village Stability Operations—then a central part of counterinsurgency efforts — and go out at night on special ops missions with the ground-pounders of Ranger Regiment" (Lemmon, 2015, para. 12).

## Program Success

Several studies have been conducted on the effectiveness of the FET program with both positive and negative results. For example, according to Lt. Col. Ginger E. Beals' study, "both the Lioness and female engagement team programs have proven to be a beneficial capability delivering huge gains by interacting with a portion of the population that the male Marines could not engage" (2010, p. 18). However, the study concludes that in order to reach maximum efficiency, FETs should be employed throughout the entire Marine Corps, and not just in limited sections, so they have the ability to support an entire area of responsibility.

Another study (McNierney, 2015) found that while FETs were effective in achieving COIN objectives, especially in terms of winning "the hearts and minds" of village elders, women, and children, it was hard to monitor how effective they actually were because they were often employed on an as-needed basis, and they did not have standardized systems or programs in place to ensure proper data collection.

Also, the *Special Operations Command Office of the Command Historian* website states that CSTs provided value in Afghanistan by building rapport with women and children, which led to critical information on high value targets and hidden weapons, while also promoting Afghan government legitimacy. It also noted that the program was adhoc and administrative support and accountability was poor. "The concept of cultural support teams as Special Operations Forces enablers remains viable, provided that a mission requirement exists" (Tracy, 2016, para. 52).



Soldiers with the 519th Military Intelligence Battalion secure an Afghan compound while Female Engagement Team 6 of 2nd Battalion, 23rd Infantry Regiment, meet with Afghans, March 3, 2013, during Operation Southern Fist III in the district of Spin Boldak, Kandahar province, Afghanistan. The unit assisted Afghan Border Police during a search for weapons caches. (U.S. Army photo by Staff Sgt. Shane Hamann, 102nd Mobile Public Affairs Detachment)

## The Future

With the drawdown of troops from the Middle East, FETs and CSTs were both suspended, however, they proved to be a great asset for the military in both their competency in military operations, as well as the intel they were able to procure. FETs and CSTs bring a capability to the military that extends beyond just the Middle East, but they do need standardization and clear mission goals in order to be utilized effectively in the future (Rowherder, 2015; Azarbaijani, 2014; Tracy, 2016).

Even with the combat ban on females lifted, and

females now graduating from combat schools—including Ranger School (Lacdan, 2019)—FETs and CSTs need to be formalized as a permanent support unit. There is no guarantee that a female will be assigned to every patrol or deployed unit to perform the necessary actions with the local female population. Having a perpetual asset that can interact with the female population in a culturally sensitive region can amplify the efforts and effectiveness of the military in the future fight, no matter its location. ■

---

## References

- Azarbaijani-Moghaddam, S. (2014). Seeking out their Afghan sisters: Female Engagement Teams in Afghanistan. *CHR. Michelsen Institute*. Retrieved from [https://www.nato.int/issues/women\\_nato/2014/5096-seeking-out-their-afghan-sisters.pdf](https://www.nato.int/issues/women_nato/2014/5096-seeking-out-their-afghan-sisters.pdf)
- Albrecht, B. (2019). A community salutes 1st Lt. Ashley White Stumpf, who died in Afghanistan. Retrieved from [https://www.cleveland.com/metro/2011/11/a\\_community\\_salutes\\_1st\\_lt\\_ash.html](https://www.cleveland.com/metro/2011/11/a_community_salutes_1st_lt_ash.html)
- Beals, G. E. (2010). Women marines in counterinsurgency operations: Lioness and female engagement teams. *Marine Corps Combat Development Command*. Retrieved from <https://apps.dtic.mil/dtic/tr/fulltext/u2/a604399.pdf>
- Bergen, P. (2012). How Petraeus changed the U.S. military. *CNN*. Retrieved from <https://www.cnn.com/2012/11/10/opinion/bergen-petraeus-legacy/index.html>
- Coll, A.C. (2012). *Evaluating female engagement team effectiveness in Afghanistan*. Wellesley College. Retrieved from [http://www.ncdsv.org/images/WC\\_Evaluating-FemaleEngagementTeamEffectivenessInAfghanistan\\_4-2012.pdf](http://www.ncdsv.org/images/WC_Evaluating-FemaleEngagementTeamEffectivenessInAfghanistan_4-2012.pdf)
- Department of Defense. (2018). *Joint Publication 3-24: Counterinsurgency*. Retrieved from [https://www.jcs.mil/Portals/36/Documents/Doctrine/pubs/jp3\\_24.pdf](https://www.jcs.mil/Portals/36/Documents/Doctrine/pubs/jp3_24.pdf)
- Lacdan, J. (2019). First enlisted female to graduate from Ranger School reflects on experience. *Army.mil*. Retrieved from <https://www.army.mil/article/226137>
- Lemmon, G. T., (2015). *Ashley's war: the untold story of a team of women soldiers on the Special Ops battlefield*. New York: Harper Perennial.
- Katt, M. (2014). Blurred lines: Cultural support team in Afghanistan. *Joint Force Quarterly*. Retrieved from <https://ndupress.ndu.edu/JFQ/Joint-Force-Quarterly-75/Article/577569/blurred-lines-cultural-support-teams-in-afghanistan/>
- Kilcullen, D., Porter, M., & Burgos, C. (2009). *U.S. government counterinsurgency guide*. Retrieved from <https://2009-2017.state.gov/documents/organization/119629.pdf>
- McNierney, B.A. (2015). Female Engagement Teams: An evaluation of the female engagement team program in Afghanistan. *U.S. Naval War College*. Retrieved from <https://digital-commons.usnwc.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1001&context=wps>
- Patria, M., Pearson, M., Zak, L., Brown, E., Martinez, L., & Effron, L. (2015). Inside 'Ashley's War,' story of a Special Ops program that put women in Afghanistan war zones. *ABC news*. Retrieved from <https://abcnews.go.com/US/inside-ashleys-war-story-special-ops-program-put/story?id=30455617>
- Pottinger, M., Jilani, H., & Russo, C. (2010). Half-hearted: Trying to win Afghanistan without Afghan women. *Small Wars Journal*. Retrieved from <https://smallwarsjournal.com/blog/journal/docs-temp/370-pottinger.pdf>
- Rohwerder, B. (2015). Lessons from Female Engagement Teams. Retrieved from <http://gsdrc.org/docs/open/hdq1186.pdf>
- The U.S. war in Afghanistan. (n.d.). *Council on Foreign Relations*. Retrieved from <https://www.cfr.org/timeline/us-war-afghanistan>
- Tracy, J.M. (2016). The U.S. Army Cultural Support Team program. *Special Operations Command Office of the Command Historian*. Retrieved from [https://www.soc.mil/ARSOF\\_History/articles/v12n2\\_cst\\_timeline\\_page\\_1.html](https://www.soc.mil/ARSOF_History/articles/v12n2_cst_timeline_page_1.html)

---

**Warrant Officer Class One Ray Kareko** is the brigade command sergeant major of 1st (New Zealand) Brigade. He is a recent graduate of the NCO Leadership Center of Excellence, Class 69, at Fort Bliss, Texas. His previous duty assignments include serving as the senior enlisted leader of 2nd Combat Service Support Battalion and Army Command School. Kareko has deployed to Afghanistan as the command sergeant major of the NZ Provincial Reconstruction Team as part of the International Security Assistance Force.

---

**Disclaimer:** The views expressed in this article are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the opinions of the NCO Journal, the U.S. Army, or the Department of Defense.

