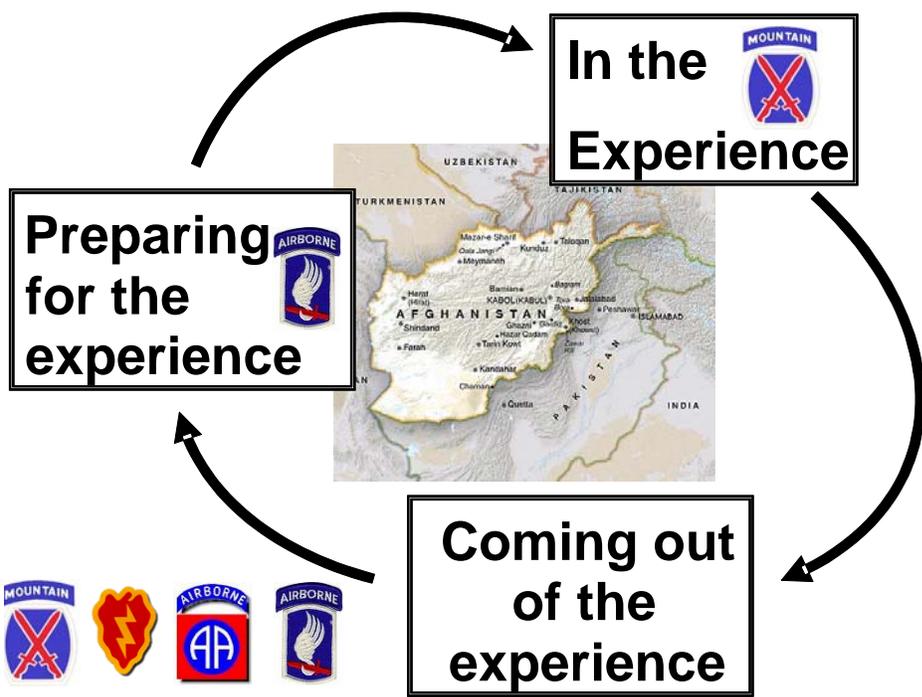




Afghan Commander

AAR Book

(OEF-7)





Afghan Cdr AAR Book



This book is by and for company commanders; it brings together commanders who have experience leading in Afghanistan with commanders who are preparing for combat operations in Afghanistan right now.



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Introduction

This book is by-and-for company commanders; it brings together commanders who have experience leading in Afghanistan with commanders who are preparing for combat operations in Afghanistan right now.

We believe that “the cutting-edge knowledge of the Army resides in the minds of leaders at the tip of the spear. Connecting these leaders in conversation brings together the Army’s greatest knowledge resources, unleashing the power of the Army profession to improve combat effectiveness.”¹

In these pages, the company commanders of Task Force Spartan (3rd Brigade, 10th Mountain Division) have gathered with you to share their hard-earned knowledge—knowledge borne of sweat and blood, forged in the rugged and sometimes ruthless mountains, valleys, and plains of Afghanistan. They know better than anyone right now how your preparation can and will make the difference between life and death, between success and failure. They want to serve you and make a difference for you. They are in it with you!

The book is organized into three main parts:

PART 1: Themes and Highlights

PART 2: TF Spartan Company Commander Insights

PART 3: Past Afghan Commander Insights

There is no substitute for experience!
We can more effectively prepare for that experience by connecting with those who have already done what we are preparing to do.

Our desire is that this book serves as a catalyst for your preparation and makes a positive difference for you and your team as you prepare for combat operations. In addition to reading what your comrades share on these pages, we encourage you to contact the contributors directly—to carry on the conversation that they have begun. Think of this AAR book as the beginning of an ongoing conversation between professionals who are committed to improving our effectiveness and advancing our profession.

It is our privilege to present this book to you. May God bless you now and in the months ahead.

Fight Fiercely!

Your CompanyCommand Team
Building Combat-Ready Teams!

¹ Dixon, et al., *Company Command: Unleashing the Power of the Army Profession* (2005). This is the story of the CC forum.



***“WITH YOUR SHIELD
OR ON IT”***

“I will tell His Majesty what a king is. A king does not abide within his tent while his men bleed and die upon the field. A king does not dine while his men go hungry, nor sleep when they stand at watch upon the wall. A king does not command his men's loyalty through fear nor purchase it with gold; he earns their love by the sweat of his own back and the pains he endures for their sake. That which comprises the harshest burden, a king lifts first and sets down last. A king does not require service of those he leads but provides it to them. He serves them, not they him.”

—Steven Pressfield, *Gates of Fire*: p. 412

Foreword

by Colonel John Nicholson (Commander, TF Spartan)

In any war, especially a counterinsurgency, company commanders perform the most challenging and critical duties on the battlefield, their decisions influencing small-unit actions as well as operational and even strategic outcomes. Given the dispersion of forces required to conduct the COIN campaign in Regional Command East, Afghanistan, the role of the company commander in TF Spartan is perhaps even more critical to success than in other theaters or operations. Our company commanders must not only possess the requisite skills to expertly conduct combined-arms operations to defeat the enemy; they must also be capable of achieving unity of effort with many diverse joint, interagency and multinational actors in achieving effects with the population in their area. Many of these entities were previously only present at higher echelons, meaning most commanders possess little, if any, experience working with them. Frequently, there is no overall unity of command, requiring the commander to become adept at identifying common interests and potential friction points, accentuating the former and mitigating the latter. Company Commanders must be able to seamlessly transition between lethal and non-lethal operations, establish relationships with district governors, village elders, Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF) leaders, and other local nationals, all the while dealing with centuries-old, complex tribal and cultural dynamics. Finally, they must be capable of operating autonomously in remote, Spartan outposts guided by their own intuition, commander's intent, and the experience and advice of their NCOs and junior leaders. The execution of all of these responsibilities is further challenged by Afghanistan's poor infrastructure, unpredictable weather, and rugged terrain, and their effects on warfighting functions, notably logistics, mobility, aviation, and communications.

The overarching TF Spartan strategy during OEF-VII has been to: (1) separate the enemy from the population, (2) achieve effects with the population through their government and (3) transform the environment both tangibly and intangibly so that the enemy is no longer welcome. This strategy can only be effectively implemented when both US and Afghan forces live amongst the population. TF Spartan recognized this and nearly tripled its footprint by establishing company and platoon-sized outposts across the area of operations, selecting locations important in terms of both the physical and human terrain. When combined US and Afghan security elements move into an area and stay, it radically changes the dynamics of the environment. Presence enables relationships with the population, develops their confidence in their own government and security forces and places continuous pressure on the enemy. While a population-focused strategy relies heavily on non-kinetic means, it increases kinetic operations as well. "Planting the flag" in the heart of known enemy sanctuaries dislocates the enemy both physically and psychologically. He must fight back or lose. TF Spartan experienced a sharp rise in combat over previous rotations, but thanks to the close combat skill and firepower of American units, killed exponentially more enemy than suffered friendly casualties. The metric of enemy dead is not useful in gauging COIN success, but it does provide insight into the degree to which a unit has separated the enemy from the populace. Killing, capturing, forcing to flee or convincing the enemy to reconcile are all ways to achieve separation. This is a continuous process, but once begun, it buys space and time for the company commander and his leaders to achieve effects with the populace. By integrating ANSF at every opportunity, connecting the people to their government, and setting the conditions for economic development through road-building and other projects, the population is convinced that their best hope for a brighter future lies with the IRoA. If the enemy attempts to regain influence, they return to find a transformed environment that is no longer hospitable for them. This transformation does not occur overnight, but rather through months and often years of determination, relationship-building, economic development, and IRoA capacity-building.

This strategy depends upon effective leadership at the leading edge—with our squads, platoons, and companies. Our company-level commanders are, across the board, exceptional—and so it is with great enthusiasm that I introduce this book, which captures their insights so well. I invite all company-level leaders, especially those of you preparing to deploy in the near future to Afghanistan, to invest your time generously in reading, studying, and discussing the insights of these leaders—commanders who have spent the last 14+ months immersed in fighting a challenging and complex counterinsurgency. It is essential that we advance the state of the art in Afghanistan with a common visualization of the way ahead, even as units and leaders rotate in and out. My intent is that this book contributes to a shared vision by transferring the hard-earned knowledge and experience achieved by Spartan company commanders to future Afghanistan company commanders. The target audience of this book is not only company leaders; it should be read by battalion, brigade, and even division and joint-task-force-level commanders and staff officers so that they may gain better situational understanding and perspective from the company commander on the ground in RC-East.

As you will find echoed throughout this book, both the terrain and weather are unforgiving, and they influence operations as much as the enemy does. A leadership challenge company commanders will face is balancing tactical and accidental risk—especially when it comes to operating in the difficult terrain and weather, to include driving heavy up-armored vehicles on dangerous unimproved roads. Moving slowly and deliberately, after conditions have been set, typically gets you to your objective quicker and with the combat power to fight. Taking shortcuts and unnecessary risks typically slows you down and/or compromises your Soldiers' safety or provides the enemy the opportunity to effectively engage you. The enemy is tough, has been fighting for generations, and should not be underestimated. However, even the most determined enemy is no match for well-trained, educated, led, and equipped US maneuver companies and platoons. To successfully operate in the rugged, mountainous terrain of RC-East, precious training time should be focused on: (1) physical fitness (and mental toughness), with emphasis on foot marching over difficult terrain with heavy loads; (2) marksmanship, especially long-range marksmanship utilizing all weapon systems and optics; (3) first responder medical training and casualty evacuation; (4) employment of fires, to include call for fire and CCA integration; and (5) small unit drills to include both mounted and dismounted drills.

When it comes to preparing your Soldiers for the human/cultural dimension of this operation, the greatest thing that you can do is educate yourself and your leaders and instill genuine respect for the Afghan people. You have heard the adage, “every Soldier a sensor”; it is also true that every Soldier is an ambassador. Given that the population is the center of gravity to this operation, ensuring cultural awareness is critical to success. The lives of Afghan people are hard and short—life expectancy is 43; one in five children die by age five; 16% of mothers die in childbirth; 80% illiteracy; 60% unemployment; public health situation is worse than a country with an AIDS epidemic—yet the Afghan people are generous, pious, hospitable and genuinely appreciate our presence in their country. While important for leaders to work hard to establish relationships with local governmental leaders and elders, it is even better if Soldiers are positively reinforcing this connection every time that they interact with people. For example, drivers should operate smartly yet safely on the roads, Soldiers should treat local nationals working on the FOB with respect, and junior leaders should seek to develop trust and confidence in the Afghan Security Forces with whom they train and operate. We should ask ourselves the question, “Is what I’m doing (the way I’m treating this person) moving them closer to or further away from supporting coalition forces and the Afghan Government?” A unit that understands this will achieve powerful results, while a unit that does not will find it difficult to accomplish the mission.

The fight here is decentralized, with young Soldiers and their NCOs and officers making important decisions with strategic consequences every day. It is therefore important to provide as many opportunities as possible for leaders to lead and to make tough decisions before they deploy. Focusing

your training at the lowest levels and using vignettes or simulations to provide junior leaders additional opportunities to exercise tactical decision-making in situations they will likely face on the ground will help. The discussion about what-would-you-do scenarios also serves as a catalyst for leaders to gain shared understanding and insights into how the team members think. For example: “PFC Jones is on an OP and observes 3 individuals vicinity a historical POO site. He is too far away to make out details, but he is convinced one of them has a weapon. Do you have PID (positive identification)? What are the potential consequences if you call in fires and they are not enemy? What are the consequences if they are enemy and you do not engage them?”

Because the fight is so decentralized, a leader cannot know everything, even if they had previous experience in Afghanistan or read every book on the excellent recommended reading list on page 15. Be humble and recognize that rank alone is not a determinant of intellect, an ability to recognize opportunities, or an ability to develop innovative solutions. Involve your subordinates and teammates on the battlefield as much as possible in the planning process and seek out their ideas and their analysis of the situation. Create and utilize a battle command system that enables you to tap into the collective genius resident in your unit—figure out how you will leverage the creativity, energy, insights and understanding of all of your subordinates. If you do so, you will be rewarded with mission success and greater unit cohesion, essential in this challenging environment.

I am extremely proud of the company commanders that you will meet in this book. They have learned and continue to learn a great deal about counterinsurgency operations and have invested much into their mission. Their collective insights provide a comprehensive view of what it takes to lead Soldiers and accomplish the mission in Afghanistan. Hopefully, this book will provide those who read it a better understanding about RC-East and enable them to better prepare their Soldiers for operations here. Future company commanders can build upon what we have done and take RC-East and the Afghan Government to the next level, another step closer to developing the capacity to effectively secure and govern its own nation and deny terrorist organizations safe haven. With your shield, or on it!

John W. Nicholson Jr.
30 March 2007
Jalalabad Air Field, Afghanistan

About the Afghan Commander AAR Project, by LTC Tony Burgess

This book is by and for company commanders; it brings together commanders who have experience leading in Afghanistan with commanders who are preparing to deploy there right now.

This book is the result of a partnership between the Company Command (CC) forum and TF Spartan (formed around the 3rd Brigade Combat Team, 10th Mountain Division). It has been a complete team effort. I contacted Colonel Nicholson, the TF Spartan Commander, in October 2006 with a proposal that we help capture the learning of his company commanders in Afghanistan. The concept fit into a comprehensive review that he and his team were already undergoing; he endorsed the project and his point man, Major Atherton, stepped up to the plate to help shape the project and facilitate our connection to the company commanders.

The project has occurred in four major phases: (1) Written survey (see Appendix C) developed and completed by TF Spartan company commanders primarily during December 2006; (2) Commander AAR narratives (Part 2 of this book) crafted from the survey input, primarily during December 2006 and January 2007; (3) Video interviews with the contributors “on location” in Afghanistan during January and February 2007; and (4) completion of this book, with emphasis on Part 1: “Themes and Highlights” during February and March 2007.

We completed an early, draft-version of the book in early December, 2006 and delivered it to Colonel Schweitzer, the 4th BDE, 82nd ABN DIV commander, at Fort Bragg for his commanders as they finalized their preparation to deploy.² On the 24th of January, while I was at FOB Naray, Kunar Province with 3-71 CAV, 3rd Brigade found out that they were being extended for four months—which, among other things, meant that another brigade task force (the 173rd ABCT) would be deploying to Afghanistan. So although our desire is for this book to provide value to all leaders preparing to deploy to Afghanistan, it is the 173rd company commanders that we are picturing specifically as we finish this edition of the book. It is those leaders who will be stepping into the breach next.

This is an iterative process: As company commanders in the experience and coming out of the experience reflect upon and share what they’ve learned with those commanders who are preparing for the experience, commanders and their units will become more effective. The alternative—not sharing what we are learning—is simply not an option if we expect to succeed. So, even as we close this edition of the book, we want to plant the seed with you to begin sharing your own experience. One place to start is in the Afghan Commander forum: <http://afghancommander.army.mil>. We will be looking for you there!

In closing, we would like to thank the TF Spartan company commanders who so eagerly stepped up to the plate to share their knowledge and experience. It is inspiring to know that they did this in the midst of fighting a challenging counterinsurgency in Afghanistan. It is our privilege to serve with you.

Fight Fiercely!

Tony Burgess for your CompanyCommand Team

Building Combat-Ready Teams!

² Thanks to Randy Hopper, Nate Allen, and Denise Corbari who helped complete and deliver the first draft to Fort Bragg in early December. The 4th BCT, 82nd ABN DIV flowed from Fort Bragg to Afghanistan during January and February 2007.