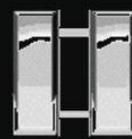


# CompanyCommand

## *Building Combat-Ready Teams*



**To:** Company Commanders  
**From:** Company Commanders

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## Facing the Insider Threat in Afghanistan

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In last month's installment of CompanyCommand, some of our peers in eastern Afghanistan shared their experiences advising ANSF as part of an SFAB. Their healthy rapport with their ANSF counterparts was palpable, even as they recognized the risks inherent in their advisory mission. Referring to the reduced combat power in an SFAB, a troop commander noted, "When we have to rely on our Afghan partners for our own survival and success, our priorities shift to make sure that they are as good as we can possibly make them."

Just a few days after last month's respondents emailed their input for last month's column, an Afghan army officer attacked and killed three U.S. advisors—LTC Todd Clark, LTC Jaimie Leonard, and contractor Joseph Morabito—on a joint U.S.-Afghan FOB. It's always heartbreaking to lose a fellow Soldier to enemy fire; it's even worse (if that's possible) to see brave Americans gunned down by someone wearing the uniform of an ally. Our decisive operation here—advising the ANSF—requires trust, yet these green-on-blue insider attacks are like metastasizing cancers that threaten to destroy trust. The enemy isn't stupid—the Taliban is made up of experienced terrorists who realize how isolated attacks can create disproportionately large effects on perceptions. We aren't fragile, though; we are experienced professionals who accept the risks of our calling and always accomplish the mission.

This month, we share our experiences of leading Soldiers in the aftermath of that insider attack. We've also invited senior leaders to share their perspectives. We hope you don't have to face this situation, but if you do, may you be prepared for the challenge.

**CPT Glen Walton**

**SFAAT Operations Officer**

On June 8, a lieutenant in the ANA brigade we mentor turned his M-16 on our team while we were on our way to eat lunch with our Afghan counterparts. Our team lead, brigade S-2 and a law enforcement professional were killed. Three others were seriously wounded. Our immediate tactical decisions were simple and we have been well trained: neutralize the threat; secure the site; and triage, treat and evacuate the casualties. For the first hour, we dealt with the tactical challenge placed in front of us. When the dustoff left the HLZ, though, the gravity of the situation set in and emo-

tions took over—anger, frustration, heartache, confusion and disgust. As Soldiers, we expect a fight when we go looking for one, but we never imagine losing friends and leaders because they are gunned down on the way to lunch.

The two principal challenges we faced in the days and weeks following the attack were how to maintain an effective advisory effort and, more importantly, how to hold a small team together after losing our senior leader and a beloved friend. In order to continue to advise effectively, we had to find ways to mitigate the risk of another green-on-blue incident. The first steps taken to deal with the security threat were the implementation of full-time "guardian angels" for any and all advisory operations—no fewer than two armed Soldiers, in kit, at all times when advisors leave the U.S. side of the FOB. Additionally, advisors now wear full PPE when traveling to meetings with Afghan counterparts.

One of the fundamental tenets of counterinsurgency is displaying trust toward counterparts in order to build rapport. The need to wear full PPE has irrevocably damaged that image of trust (not that wearing PPE isn't warranted). Furthermore, the requirement to move in larger groups forces advisors to act far more deliberately. Gone is our flexibility to accompany a counterpart across his compound on a whim to coach him through the solution to a dynamic problem.

The increased security posture is an obstacle to effective interaction with the Afghans, but an even bigger obstacle is the human response we are all dealing with after losing a third of our team in such a brutal fashion. Some advisors are simply unable to continue to work so closely with host-nation counterparts, and there is absolutely nothing wrong with that. We are an Army built on professionalism: We must be able to recognize our own limits and those of our teammates. In order to drive on and do our jobs, we have to be able to recognize how we are reacting, understand the normalcy of those emotions, and still interact in a professional manner with our counterparts.

We found that our Afghan counterparts were just as shaken as we were. We shed tears together and worked through the shock and grief side by side. I spent a full hour the night of the attack sitting next to the ANA deputy G-3. Not a word was said, and not a word needed to be said.

To keep the team as cohesive as possible, you must be able to identify your "tent pole." Who is the team member



*LTC Rob Griggs, commander of 1st Squadron, 89th Cavalry Regiment, talks with an Afghan officer on an ANA FOB. Advising ANSF requires trust, but insider attacks do occur. Leaders must set the tone before, during and after any incident.*

who holds everything up? It probably won't be your most outspoken NCO, and it probably won't be a senior Soldier. You're looking for the person to whom the young NCOs and officers gravitate. Who is the most emotionally steady? Who's working through his own issues yet is still there to take care of others? Identify this person and lean on him.

At some point—and that time will likely arrive much sooner than you feel comfortable with—the team will have to go back to work. To fail to do so would dishonor the memory and efforts of those lost and would be a violation of nearly every one of our values. After an insider attack, be deliberate, be decisive and work hard to get back to the mission.

**CPT Jeff Bernasconi**  
**Security Troop Commander**

On June 8, I was sitting in the troop command post when I heard the report: "Shots fired at the ANA brigade TOC and there are casualties." The RAID camera immediately scanned to the building and gained visual of the scene as casualties were being loaded into an Afghan army vehicle and began speeding toward the U.S. aid station. We had trained for this, and we initiated two battle drills: mass casualty and Alamo plan. In less than an hour, all U.S. personnel were consolidated on the American side of the base and the six casualties were airlifted to a higher level of care. I am sharing my experience here to shed some perspective on dealing with—and moving forward after—an insider attack.

The actions in the first hour were based on training. The SFAAT that was attacked neutralized the threat, treated casualties and secured the site. I ordered increased force pro-

tection at the entry control point, deployed a quick reaction force to recover advisors still on the ANA side and initiated a mass casualty battle drill. I reported to higher what information I knew at the time, received guidance from the squadron commander, and continued to manage the situation and coordinate assets. The bottom line is that everyone hopes that a green-on-blue attack will never happen, but you must train and rehearse for exactly these types of scenarios.

**CompanyCommand Glossary**

- ANA-** Afghan National Army
- ANSF-** Afghan National Security Forces
- Dustoff-** a medevac helicopter
- FOB-** forward operating base
- G-3-** operations officer
- HLZ-** helicopter landing zone
- IED-** improvised explosive device
- Kandak-** ANA battalion
- PPE-** personal protective equipment
- RAID-** rapid aerostat initial deployment
- S-2-** intelligence officer
- SFAAT-** security force advisory and assistance team
- SFAB-** security force assistance brigade
- TOC-** tactical operations center

We can sit back and ask numerous questions about how this could have been prevented. I am sure those will be addressed in the “lessons learned” portion of the investigation. I will tell you, however, that things have changed. Advisors now move to and from meetings in full PPE; our RAID camera closely monitors actions within the FOB; and there is a deliberate increase in dedicated guardian angel security. But the most critical change has been in trust.

A lieutenant from the team that was attacked asked me, “Why? Here we are in this country trying to help them, building a relationship with them, and they shoot at us? How and why do we ever go back to advising them?” My answer was fairly simple and short: “Because it’s the mission and it is not ‘them’ as a group who attacked us; it was one individual.” His was a common sentiment among many Soldiers—along with grief, anger, shock and guilt. Perception had to be managed. The Afghan army is not the enemy, and leaders had to ensure that we did not respond or react as if it were. For the advisors, that came a little easier because of their pre-existing relationships with Afghans, but the first sergeant and I had to spend time with our security platoons explaining the concepts of tone and stance. I am not sure if the Soldiers initially understood, but seeing their leaders and advisors set the example during the first few days helped.

Insider attacks have the capability to completely undermine the decisive operation in Afghanistan—advising the ANSF—so I would argue that it is the enemy’s most effective tactic. Dealing with and moving forward after an insider attack must be a deliberate process shaped by leaders. Be prepared through training and rehearsals; be compassionate and steadfast through the grieving process; manage perceptions; and maintain a resolute emphasis on the mission. We honor our fallen by continuing the mission they so strongly believed in.

**CPT Tad Coleman**  
**SFAAT Team Leader**

Upon hearing that an attack happened, my team had to move to the Afghan army side of the FOB. Once we left the American side, we were met by the leadership of the *kandak* we had been training for the past five months. They were all in full gear and had weapons. At this time, I did not know who had done the shooting or where the injured were located. All I knew was that I was facing 10 fully armed Afghans who were looking at my fully armed team. I had to put aside my fears and resume advising and trusting my counterparts. I put my weapon down and extended my hand to the *kandak* commander, asking what he knew about the situation. That exchange, right after the attack, set the tone for the way forward.

The ANA commander briefed me on what was happening and where the injured were located. Together we made it known across the Afghan FOB that we were still working together to make Afghanistan a better place.

Back on the American side, I was briefed on what had happened and then prepared my team to assist with the



*CPT Jeff Bernasconi, with his ANA counterpart at a commander’s conference convened just two weeks after a rogue ANA officer killed three American advisors, believes, “We honor our fallen by continuing the mission they so strongly believed in.”*

casualties. The scene was out of a violent war movie, except that we were treating our friends. The emotional impact was so intense; at that time, I experienced doubts about our mission.

In the first few days after the attack, we were not allowed to visit the Afghan side of the FOB, but this restriction did

One paradox of counterinsurgency is: ‘Sometimes, the more you protect your force, the less secure you may be.’ Green-on-blue prevention measures must take that into account. You have to consider the mission, the cost, the effects and everything else. To completely shut yourselves off from risk would be to separate yourselves from the mission.

**—CPT Darrell Fawley,**  
**recent commander of a U.S.-Afghan FOB**

not stop us from contacting our Afghan *kandak* to continue the advising. We used an Afghan radio operator on the American side of the FOB as our main form of contact and met with the *kandak* leadership at the gate two to three times a day. The worst thing that could have happened

*Through his interpreter, an American advisor converses with his Afghan army counterpart on an ANA FOB. The U.S. soldier wears personal protective equipment while armed soldiers serve as “guardian angels” prepared to deal with any aggressors.*



would have been to create enemies in places where they were not before the attack, so we kept communication open and shared with each other the changes that were coming due to the incident.

As we met at the gate, the heightened sense of security was the hardest thing to control. Many of the U.S. Soldiers who did not have the advising role were unsure how to re-

The insider threat is not unique to the current war. In the Vietnam War, the threat came from our own soldiers attacking their officers or NCOs in so-called fragging incidents. According to official records, 34 U.S. military leaders were killed by their own soldiers in 209 insider attacks in Vietnam in 1970. The same number of Americans were killed in 47 insider attacks against coalition forces in Afghanistan in 2012.

spond. When an American is killed in a green-on-blue attack, the normal response may be to blame all Afghans when in reality, it was just one. Listening to American Soldiers talk helped us assess what they were feeling and thinking. As an advisor, I had to make sure I did not move faster than the Soldiers who guarded me as I moved forward. If a Soldier is hypervigilant, he will make mistakes and send the impression that all trust is lost; consequently, the advisor will lose rapport. If the rapport is lost, then the

advising mission will suffer. The advisor has to be very sensitive to those around him or her and be willing to make staffing changes if necessary. Not all persons move forward from an incident in the same way.

The ability to move forward with your Afghan partner after an insider attack is built before the event occurs. Knowing the leadership and those Soldiers who are usually around them the most helps before an attack occurs. I have found that the *kandak* leadership was very embarrassed about the incident and became overly concerned with my team's welfare. They increased their security posture as we increased ours. This increase led to some heightened tensions as we advised, but the feelings could be controlled as the Afghan and American Soldiers watched the interaction of their leaders. I found that I had to put aside any feelings of distrust and help make the situation feel less tense through my actions with the *kandak* commander. The leaders set the tone in advising before, during and after an insider attack.

#### **A Battalion-Level Commander in Afghanistan**

Prejudices are more prevalent than we want to admit. I was personally and professionally disappointed to witness the “us versus them” attitude that emerged immediately after a green-on-blue incident. The most negative attitudes seemed to be held by those not directly involved in the incident. Those who express their prejudices do not seem to realize that they are a risk to mission success. Theirs are the attitudes that the enemy exploits when it recruits insiders to conduct these types of attacks.

After any loss of life or serious injury in war, emotions and personal sorrow must take a back seat to the mission. Just as one cannot stop the assault under fire to treat a casualty, we



*U.S. and Afghan commanders met for an all-day conference to forge “the way ahead” together after an insider attack threatened the progress they had been making.*

cannot pause our advising mission for a minute, no matter how heavy our hearts might be at the loss of our fellow Soldiers.

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### **A Brigade Commander in Afghanistan**

Insider attacks are attempts by the enemy to disrupt progress that it finds threatening—plain and simple. How we respond is all about perspective. After an insider attack, should we allow Soldiers to stop working with Afghans? Well, would we allow Soldiers whose unit was hit by an IED on patrol to stop patrolling? Of course not. The IED is an attempt to prevent U.S. Soldiers from connecting with the local population. The insider attack is an attempt to prevent U.S. Soldiers from interacting with the ANSF. The enemy fears U.S. forces forging strong relationships with the local population and fears our advising mission. Both the IED and the insider attack are designed to drive a wedge between U.S. forces and Afghans. Leaders must not allow that to happen.

I remind my leaders that these insider attacks are not sanctioned “hits” by the ANSF leadership; they are the actions of a few ill-disciplined or “turned” ANSF. ANSF leaders cannot control every one of their Soldiers. Cultural awareness and understanding, strong interpersonal skills and constant vigilance are the best preventive measures.

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*Do you have experience with leading your Soldiers to continue the mission after an insider attack? Are you deploying soon and interested in learning all you can about this challenge? If you are a currently commissioned officer who is passionate about leadership at the company level,*

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*Art by Jody Harmon*

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