



## **In Counterinsurgency Class, Soldiers Think Like Taliban**

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KABUL, Afghanistan -- A natural-born insurgent, Sgt. First Class Jacob Stockdill was brimming with malicious suggestions when a group of American soldiers and Afghan security men sat down last month to plot their own defeat.

"I can put a guy out on a ridge with an AK-47 and have him take a couple of shots," Sgt. Stockdill proposed to fellow students at the Army's new Afghanistan Counterinsurgency Academy. "The Americans will shoot back with their big guns and disrupt the whole valley.... Being an insurgent would be so easy." Capt. Chris Rowe finished his thought: "All you have to do is not screw up, and, even if you do, you just blame it on the Americans."

Six years into the Afghan war, the Army has decided its troops on the ground still don't understand well enough how to battle the Taliban insurgency. So since the spring, groups of 60 people have been attending intensive, five-day sessions in plywood classrooms in the corner of a U.S. base here, where they learn to think like a Taliban and counterpunch like a politician.

The academy's principal message: The war that began to oust a regime has evolved into a popularity contest where insurgents and counterinsurgents vie for public support and the right to rule. The implicit critique: Many U.S. and allied soldiers still arrive in the country well-trained to kill, but not to persuade.

In April, the Army gave a 26-year-old Rhodes scholar, Capt. Dan Helmer, six weeks to get the school up and running. Capt. Helmer tells his students, who rank as high as colonel, that the important battles here are 80% political and just 20% military. He exhorts them to go to great lengths to understand local politics, culture and history, to make sure actions they take on the battlefield help convince Afghans that the Kabul government will serve and protect them.

"We're trying to win an argument that supporting the government is worth risking your life for," he says. It's an argument, he says, that the U.S.-led coalition isn't yet winning. "Today we control no more and no less of Afghanistan than the Soviets did," during their 10-year occupation that began in 1979.

### **'Uneven Understanding'**

Lt. Col. John Nagl, co-author of the Army's counterinsurgency doctrine, says he was struck during a visit to troops in Afghanistan earlier this year by their "uneven understanding of counterinsurgency principles" at work in the Afghan campaign. Col. Nagl commands a battalion at Fort Riley, Kan., dedicated to training American troops to become mentors to Iraqi and Afghan forces. When he returned from his trip, he urged commanders to set up the counterinsurgency school and to put Capt. Helmer in charge.



Dan Helmer

Capt. Helmer, a West Point graduate from Mantua, N.J., originally deployed to Afghanistan as a mentor for the Afghan National Police. At Oxford, he was author of a study on Israel's fight against Hezbollah guerrillas in Lebanon, where an army with overwhelming conventional superiority found itself mired against insurgents who had the vital support of the locals. Fast-talking, with deep-set eyes, a sunburned neck and a moustache that he grew out of respect for Afghanistan's hairiness-is-next-to-manliness culture, he says he thought from the start that Army training didn't prepare troops well for the intricacies of fighting the Afghan insurgency.

Army officials say they've made great strides this year providing troops with Afghanistan-specific training before they reach the combat zone -- including counterinsurgency seminars for officers and scenario exercises for foot soldiers. But the Army acknowledges that some troops fall through the cracks. "There isn't enough time between being told that they're going and getting them through the training," says Lou Gelling, deputy commander of the Army's battle command training program. "That's the reality of it."

The counterinsurgency training sometimes seems targeted more toward Iraq, according to Capt. Helmer and Col. Nagl. Of the 90 men under Col. Nagl's command, almost all are Iraq veterans and just one has served in Afghanistan. Even Capt. Helmer's orders to Afghanistan included the mistaken, but telling, instruction to take a course in Arabic -- a language spoken in Iraq, but not in Afghanistan.

In Iraq, the U.S. has set up separate counterinsurgency academies for Iraqi and coalition students. In Afghanistan, Capt. Helmer insisted on putting troops from the 37-nation coalition into the classroom with their counterparts from the Afghan army, police and spy service. One of the school's central tenets is that foreign forces cannot win the war. Afghan security forces and government officials must take the lead in any activity, whether it's an attack on Taliban redoubts or reconstruction of a mosque, in order to increase popular support for President Hamid Karzai's government.

"Afghans have more experience in irregular warfare than anyone in the world -- full stop," says Capt. Helmer. Many members of Afghanistan's security forces fought either for or against mujahedeen insurgents during the Soviet occupation, or fought as rebels against the Taliban government that ruled from 1996 until the U.S.-led invasion in 2001.

Capt. Helmer and his instructors, many of them pulled out of combat to teach for a few days, tell students that for the insurgents to succeed, they must discredit the government while selling the Afghan public on a cause -- Islamic purity, tribal rivalries, a simple distaste for foreign occupation, or revenge for past affronts to family and honor.

Students took the roles of insurgents in an academy session late last month. Capt. Khawja Mohammed, a 38-year-old training officer for the Afghan riot police, suggested they stage a public hanging of someone suspected of collaborating with the coalition. "We can intimidate people," he offered.



Lt. Col. Sayed Najeeb of the Afghan intelligence service proposed a series of attacks on coalition or government checkpoints. "That will tell the people that the government can't take care of itself," Col. Najeeb, a 38-year-old with a thick black beard, black shirt and black pinstriped suit. He spoke in Dari, one of Afghanistan's main languages, through an interpreter. As insurgents, he said, "We can tell the people that the infidels have come to destroy their religion, but if we don't demonstrate enough force, people won't join us."

Sgt. First Class James Litchford, 43, from Hattiesburg, Miss., said he would plan a frontal assault on a major U.S. base. The attackers should grab the Americans "by the belt," he said -- that is, get so close to the base so fast that the defenders wouldn't dare use air strikes or artillery for fear of hitting their own men. Then the insurgents would swarm through the base defenses, he said.

"All you've got to do is overrun it," he said. "You don't have to hold it." The news media would do the rest, he said, boosting the insurgents' standing in Afghanistan and damaging morale back in the U.S. "We've got to bleed them out and make the coalition lose its will to fight," said Sgt. Stockdill, a beefy 33-year-old from Rural Valley, Pa., warming to the challenge.

### 'Clear, Hold and Build'

Academy instructors teach that counterinsurgents must "clear, hold and build" to insulate the public from insurgent tactics while demonstrating that the government has something better to offer. In the "clear" stage, Afghan and coalition troops physically force insurgents from villages and towns, separating them from the civilian populace. The military then fills the void with quick-impact aid such as emergency clinics, food distribution or free blankets and farm implements.

In the next phase, the government and its allies must maintain a constant presence to hold the villages, to reassure the public that the insurgents won't come back to punish those who collaborate with the authorities. They also should sweeten the pot by providing more substantial projects to demonstrate Kabul's competence, such as rebuilding a mosque or repairing irrigation ditches. "You lose credibility with the people if you don't hold," Marine First Lt. Jack Isaac, a 24-year-old instructor from Dallas, Pa., warned his class.

Instructors told students how in the Chalekor Valley in Zabur Province, an American-led force cleared five villages in May 2006 and inflicted terrible casualties on Taliban fighters who tried to overrun a joint U.S.-Afghan base. The allied forces provided medical services and other goodwill projects. But ultimately they didn't have enough troops to maintain a presence in the valley. When they pulled out, the Taliban returned.

The "build" phase requires long-term economic development so that "the enemy is no longer welcome and support for the government is strong," according to the academy's student handbook. That means bigger projects, such as paved roads linking isolated

villages to market towns. Results ultimately will be apparent not in the number of dead Taliban, instructors say -- but in indicators such as school attendance, election turnouts, business growth and increasing tips about impending attacks.

## **Putting Theory Into Practice**

But as the academy students discovered, putting the theory into practice can feel like building a sand castle as the tide is coming in. There's only so much aid money to go around. There are only so many soldiers to clear and hold. There are local blood feuds to resolve. There are local power structures to decipher. There are civilians to charm. And there are insurgents trying to disrupt the whole venture.

One common complaint in Afghanistan is that the coalition makes big promises, but fails to deliver. "Afghans don't understand how, if the world's only superpower is involved in a fight, it can't get them a goddamn road after promising to do so in 2002," says Capt. Helmer.

Smaller missteps can undo months of counterinsurgency efforts. Lt. Isaac and a fellow instructor arrived at the academy last month in a U.S. military convoy. The drivers, worried about suicide bombers and ambushes, sped through Kabul, honking and bullying civilian vehicles away. "We just made a thousand new enemies," Lt. Isaac told his colleague.

Another example: As a goodwill gesture in September, coalition soldiers in Khost Province handed out soccer balls decorated with the flags of the world. One of them, the Saudi flag, bears a verse from the Koran. Rumors spread widely that the coalition was, in essence, encouraging Afghan children to put their holy book on the ground and kick it.

More damaging are any deaths of Afghan civilians at the hands of coalition forces. Sgt. Litchford told his classmates one day: "The military can't win this war, but it sure as hell can lose it." Capt. Ray Gilmore, a 30-year-old from North Conway, N.H., told his students about a fight earlier this year in the Zerkoh Valley, in which locals and Western media reported that U.S. air strikes killed dozens of civilians. The U.S. military says Special Forces troops came under Taliban attack and killed 136 fighters, but that further investigation found no evidence of civilian deaths. Still, the Afghan government permanently banned coalition troops from entering the area, Capt. Gilmore says.

Capt. Helmer says counterinsurgents face a paradox: "The more you protect the force, the less safe you are." When coalition troops hole up in big bases, surrounded by barbed wire and sand barriers, they risk turning the locals toward the insurgents. Small, vulnerable outposts set among the villages, such as ones the Army has erected along the Pech River Valley near Pakistan, bring troops and people closer together. When the insurgents attack the troops, they are attacking the people, too. But such exposed positions also increase the near-term risk of allied casualties.

Col. Najeeb, the Afghan intelligence officer, complained to American classmates that coalition troops sometimes are so nervous about being hit that they mistrust all Afghans, including the security forces. He told of being sent to scout out a village before a coalition sweep. As he left the village on a motorcycle, NATO troops opened fire on him, even though he waved ID proving he is a government agent. He never got close enough to warn the coalition soldiers of the ambush that awaited them in the village, he said.

His classmate Capt. Nick Talbot, a 27-year-old from Washington, D.C., countered with a story about a car bomb in September in Nangarhar Province near Pakistan. U.S. troops arrived to find a man in a police uniform unconscious on the ground. When they did a routine body search for any unseen injuries, they discovered he was wearing a vest filled with explosives. The man woke up, but was unable to detonate the bomb before the soldiers killed him. "It can make you very hesitant to work very closely" with Afghan security forces, Capt. Talbot confessed to Col. Najeeb.

Sgt. Richard Palmer, 37, a fire-department paramedic from Myrtle Beach, S.C., asked for his classmates' advice in handling cultural differences. Sgt. Palmer works as a police mentor in Kapisa Province, near Kabul. Not long ago, he and three Afghan police officers were standing guard while other forces entered a building. During the search, Sgt. Palmer was dumbfounded to see the Afghan officers remove their shoes and socks and begin their prayers.

He wanted to be culturally sensitive, but didn't want any insurgents climbing over the compound wall. In the end, he stood guard by himself. "I didn't know how to approach that," he told his classmates. Capt. Khawja, the riot-police trainer, responded: "When we're on a mission, we have to do our duty. We can pray at another time. God will never punish me for that."

Marine Lt. Col. Christopher Nash, a 40-year-old instructor from Hillsboro, Ore., agreed but had a broader take. "Think about what the insurgents are trying to tell the populace -- that the coalition is the infidel," he told the students.

If the public saw coalition troops patrolling side-by-side with Afghan troops carrying their prayer mats, it might send "a powerful message," he said. "It may be an inconvenience in the security area, but in the hearts-and-minds area, it's a big win."

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