



## **OMLT in Afghanistan – The Exit Strategy**

**By Maj R.D. Dove, CD**

---



**Maj Robbin Dove served as OMLT Kandak S2/S3 Mentor and OMLT Ops O on Op ATHENA Roto 4. He is currently OC B Sqn at the Armour School.**

### INTRODUCTION

The war in Afghanistan is not one which Canada and its Allies can afford to fight indefinitely. Political pressures at home and the attrition and increased operational tempo of our troops serving in Afghanistan all lead to the fact that we must be prepared to leave the fight in the next several years. It is unlikely that peace will reign in Afghanistan by 2011 when Canada has slated its military withdrawal from the country, therefore somebody will have to carry on the fight. The obvious response to this is that the Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF), to include Afghan National Army (ANA) and Afghan National Police (ANP), must be prepared to assume responsibility for their own security when we leave the country. The mechanism to prepare their forces for this responsibility is the Operational Mentor and Liaison Team (OMLT). Canada has been providing the example to ANSF in regards to the training and conduct of operations since the establishment of our first OMLT, however there are few people within our Forces who truly understand the OMLT role and responsibilities as well as the challenges which the OMLT faces. This paper will aim to explain the role of the OMLT in contributing to the success of ANSF following the eventual withdrawal of our forces.

### BACKGROUND

The OMLT is comprised of all Army trades who “mentor and empower the Afghan national security forces, in order to accelerate progress towards the goal of self-sufficient and ethnically balanced Afghan security forces providing security and ensuring the rule of law throughout the country.”<sup>1</sup> The first Canadian OMLT, deployed in August 2006, was comprised of mentors for one infantry Kandak (Afghan battalion) as well as mentorship for the Bde Comd and key positions of 1-205 Corps. It has grown to mentorship of three infantry Kandaks, one Combat Support Kandak and a Combat Service Support Kandak as well as mentorship of the entire Bde HQ 1-205 Corps and some key positions in 205 Corps. In August 2007, it also began mentorship of some of Afghan National Police, as Police OMLT (P-OMLT) in the Zhari and Panjwai Districts of Kandahar province.

Since the beginning of the Canadian OMLT, mentorship has been conducted by members of all trades, including of course Armour. They have occupied roles various mentor and headquarters roles from Commanding Officer to P-OMLT mentor. All trades are forced to continuously employ the key characteristic of Armour – Flexibility - in the fluid and challenging

---

<sup>1</sup> UN Security Council Resolution 1833, 22 Sept 2008; [http://www.nato.int/isaf/topics/mandate/unscr/resolution\\_1833.pdf](http://www.nato.int/isaf/topics/mandate/unscr/resolution_1833.pdf)



OMLT context. The training we receive throughout our careers, including basic dismounted skills at the section level, is key to rapidly and competently adapting to a variety of different tasks required to develop the ANSF.

Since the ANA and ANP we mentored were motorised rather than mechanised, the majority of the operations in which the OMLT was involved was dismounted, supported by Canadian and coalition Infantry, Armour, Engineers, Air and Aviation. The training we receive in operational planning and execution is easily adapted to the employment of light forces in cooperation with a combined arms team, as well as independently. We have all the tools we require to complete the tasks ourselves. Getting soldiers and officers from another culture, however, to understand, accept and begin to employ what we commonly understand as the way to do business is the unique challenge which the OMLT mentor faces on a daily basis.

#### OMLT AND ANA: THE COMMAND RELATIONSHIP

One of the most misunderstood things about the OMLT is the command relationship that exists with the ANA: there is none. After seven months in theatre, many people from Joint Task Force Afghanistan Headquarters (JTFA HQ), the BG and BG sub-units still did not understand that we (OMLT) could not order the ANA to do anything. Our relationship with the ANA was one of liaison with coalition partners and as trusted advisors to help them plan and conduct operations. We could not order them to deploy their QRF, to conduct a sweep of a route for IEDs, or to continue to advance during an operation. This lack of command relationship meant that personal relationships and trust were doubly important. We were able to influence them into choosing a desired course of action and completing tasks through "key leader engagements" at all levels. This was often as simple as the Coy Comd Mentor asking the ANA Kandak leadership if they would deploy to provide a cordon for an IED; through the relationship and common goal of defeating the insurgents, the ANA would often assume risks and conduct tasks on the basis that their OMLT thought it was a good idea and an important task.

For deliberate operations, either initiated by the BG, JTF-A or OMLT HQ, it was important to start introducing the concept to all levels of the ANA leadership (and even in some cases the Governor of Kandahar) early on. The OMLT CO, who mentored the ANA Bde Comd, ensured that the reasons for the operation and the importance of ANA participation were well understood at the Bde level. If the Bde commander supported the Op then it was brought up with the Kandak Comd through the Kandak Senior Mentor. Unlike in our army, where a Bde Comd ordering a Battalion to conduct an Op means that it will be conducted, this cannot always be assumed with the ANA. Some Kandak Comds would protest an Op for specific reasons, with varied results. OMLT Coy Comd mentors would engage their ANA Coy leadership as well in order to gain their support for an Op, which improved chances of convincing the Kandak Comd that the Op was a good idea. It sounds like a convoluted approach when seen from our top-down, mission-command army, however it usually met with decent results.

The ANA did initiate some operations on their own, and were able to develop schemes of manoeuvre which were sound. The experience and competence level of Kandak Comds varies greatly from one organization to the next. Unlike JTFA, the ANA did not require approval from Regional Command (South) (RC(S)) to conduct operations. This has the advantage of being able to more rapidly conduct operations without the necessity of a lengthy approval process. If JTFA was contributing forces of Coy level or higher or Air assets, however, to an ANA-led Op, then the CONOP still had to be briefed in order to gain approval for participation and to seek authorization for the use of certain Rules of Engagement (RoE). The decision: have the ANA do it on their timelines but without coalition combat multipliers or take the time to make it deliberate and get all the goodies to succeed.

We also influenced the ANA during the conduct of operations once they had begun, most notably through our mentors who fought alongside the ANA. We decided to further influence the battle by having ANA Bde staff (generally the G3) present in the OMLT CP at KAF. This allowed them to listen to and follow the battle over our radio means (obviously with the aid of a translator) and provide direction to the Kandak Comd on the ground. This was beneficial in that it introduced the ANA Bde staff to our way of operating and gave us an ability to mentor him and influence his direction to subordinate comds.



Photo : Capt R. Colbourne



Kandak 3-1-205 Mentor Team, Aug 07. Photo by Capt R. Colbourne

### THE CULTURE GAP AND CHALLENGES IN WORKING WITH ANSF

My personal motto, *Souplesse et Patience* (Flexibility and Patience), was key to survival and sanity for most of the OMLT and became the de facto motto for our OMLT HQ. One of the first things we were told when we began training for the OMLT that we had to be prepared to slow down and adapt to the pace with which things are done in Afghanistan. One of the keys to opening dialogue is to spend time together with your counterpart, and this is usually done over *chai* (tea). Once a degree of familiarity is gained, you are then able to start concentrating on work. The ANA regard us as the experts and will listen to most suggestions we have and employ them, sometimes without thinking critically about them; credibility and competency is assumed and is yours to lose. This can be a stumbling block when you are attempting to get the ANA to come up with plans on their own, as they would rather let you plan and simply take your plan and execute it. The patience required became abundantly clear when I first sat down with the Kandak S3 to plan the upcoming week of patrolling and framework operations in Panjwai District. After 3 hours of drinking chai and attempting to get the S3 to plan a week of patrolling with aim, timings, duration and composition, we had completed planning for 1 day. When we sat down the next night to continue, I planned the rest of the week and explained as I went. The next week he was able to come up with much of the planning on his own with some help. What I learned from this is that the old method of demo, practice, confirmation holds true and that the pace must really be adapted to experience level.

Another cultural challenge is the planning of operations around religious holidays. We are used to having leave for holidays which starts and ends at precise dates, which makes planning around them relatively easy. The ANA, generally Muslims, celebrate Islamic religious holidays throughout the year, regardless of operations. These holidays can have a major impact on operational planning and design. Ramadan<sup>2</sup>, for example, celebrates the time when the verses of the Qur'an were revealed to the Prophet Muhammad, and is celebrated by roughly a month of fasting during daylight hours. The impact of fasting on soldiers who are conducting operations in hot climates and cannot drink or eat is obviously not positive. Their requirement to pray more during this time also negatively impacts their ability to conduct operations. Another problem with Ramadan and the day of its conclusion, Eid al-fitr, is that the days they start are decided by sighting of the moon in certain phases. This means that the start and end-dates are not pre-determined and exact, which makes them difficult to plan around – you may want to delay an operation for 1 day to allow for a religious holiday but end-up delaying for 2-3 days due to the phases of the moon. Additionally, many of the soldiers and particularly ANA leadership take the opportunity of religious holidays to go on leave, leaving Kandaks without critical leadership to make operational decisions. Religious holidays are a grey zone for OMLT which need to be accepted and worked around to maximize operational employment and impact of the ANA on the ground.

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.bbc.co.uk/birmingham/faith/2003/10/ramadan.shtml>



## THE TRAP

Patience really is the key virtue for employment in the OMLT. When mentors arrive on the ground, they are full of patience and accept the time required to get things done. As the tour progresses, however, the OMLT level of frustration accumulates. The Battle Group (BG) has been working up for over six months and is ready to go after a solid handover in theatre and a familiarization with the ground. They are ready to implement the campaign plan and begin patrolling and striking objectives in order to improve security. One of the keys to success of the campaign is to ensure that all BG operations have an "Afghan face," that is to have ANSF participation. This does not always align well with the level of training and experience of the various Kandaks and the specific Afghan and Canadian leaders involved. It is very easy for OMLT to fall into the trap of "just doing it for them this one time," to tell the ANA what to do and essentially plan and lead the operation for them. We all want our Company or Kandak to succeed and survive the operation. This is a major danger, however, because it may become status quo. Mentoring is a long and sometimes frustrating process. Leading their troops is fast and effective and may get the ANA through the immediate operation and satisfy the pressure to have an Afghan face on all Ops. Mentoring, however, is the only way to get their troops and leadership to develop their own skills so that they can some day do it independently without coalition leadership or support.

## GIVE THEM A FISH OR A FISHING ROD?

Prior to Canada assuming mentorship of ANA Kandaks, they were either mentored by the United States Embedded Training Teams (US ETTs) or Netherlands OMLT. Both of these organizations varied in approach from our OMLT, and the habits learned with other forces were difficult to break. The US (and the Dutch to a certain extent) had much more discretionary spending ability than we do and did not hesitate to throw around money in order to buy things that they needed, whether mission critical or not (phone cards were like crack cocaine to the ANA when we arrived!) When we took over mentorship of a Kandak that had been with a Dutch OMLT previously, we had to break them of the habit of always asking for more food, more gas, better clothes and all the little things that they had come to expect. Most of what they need is available through their supply system, which is very slow in planning for and reacting to the needs of deployed troops. This led to their frustration and attempts to short-cut their way to what they need. The problem with this, like leading their troops in combat, is that they will never develop self-sufficiency if we solve their problems for them. It is for this reason that the CSS Kandak Mentors had the very challenging task of attempting to instill some efficiency in the ANA CSS mechanisms so that they could supply their troops in the field. With a lot of coaching and patience, the CSS Kandak was able to organize and conduct regular supply runs from Hero Camp (formerly Camp Shirzai, located adjacent to Kandahar Airfield (KAF)) to the Forward Operating Bases (FOBs) in Zhari and Panjwai Districts. Due to their lack of blast-resistant vehicles, the Kandak Higher Headquarters Company (HHC) logistics assets normally conducted resupply of forward Company Strong-Points (SPs) in conjunction with coalition convoys and Route Clearance Packages (RCPs).

The ANA standard of living in their main camp as well as the FOBs was quite good, which meant that the Kandaks were sometimes reluctant to push out their companies to isolated SPs. In order to "convince" them that it was feasible to deploy forward to SPs it was necessary to ensure that they would be resupplied regularly, a problem which was mostly solved by Coalition assets. The ANA rely heavily on fresh rations and are reluctant to eat IMPs (even if they are the only thing available). When deployed to isolated locations, they are able to take advantage of local food and water sources, purchasing what they can from the local villagers. This ability to find what they need becomes particularly important when the wet ground in December to February makes it very difficult for RCPs to reach troops via roads. Helicopter resources were scarce and frequently cancelled, and we were simply not able to keep them supplied with fresh food and firewood for heating. The ANA proposed resupply via donkeys, the contracting of which was facilitated by the OMLT. In the end, we never conducted resupply by donkey but the system was in place if required. This initiative by the ANA is a good example of their ability to solve problems on their own if forced to do so.

## OPSEC

One of the challenges that many people foresaw in operating with the ANA was the question of Operational Security (OPSEC). Not having developed the close relationships with the ANSF, many coalition personnel outside the OMLT wondered how we could trust them with details about upcoming operations – "How do you know he is not Taliban?" We had few issues with OPSEC when working with the ANA, as they practised their own filtering of information from their troops at the command level. We believe in issuing of warning orders when initiating operational planning, the aim being to allow for concurrent planning and preparation at all levels. The ANA commanders generally kept details of upcoming operations at no lower than Coy Comd level until the day prior to execution. This leaves little time for planning at lower levels but also decreases the risk of OPSEC breaches by troops talking about upcoming missions on their cell phones.

Interpreters were a greater potential source for OPSEC compromise. They were crucial to communication with the ANA, and were therefore privy to all details concerning upcoming ops. With an unclear system of background checks employed by the company who supplies the interpreters, we had to employ some methods to ensure that OPSEC was maintained at our level. We generally did this by confiscating cell phones from the interpreters and only allowing access to them when we saw fit. This included no calling privileges within 48-72 hrs prior to an Op commencing. Interpreters are not happy with the loss of cell phones (at Kandak level I had 10 interpreters who threatened to quit if we confiscated their phones). The pay they receive,



however, is very good (much better than the ANA) so nobody actually quits. When the safety of our troops is at question, limiting interpreter access to cell phones is a no-brainer.

### VEHICLE MOVEMENT – THE OMLT PERSPECTIVE

The threat of IED and requirement for mutual support requires that vehicles do not move alone. An IED strike on a vehicle may disable communications and render the vehicle crew unable to communicate due to injury, therefore another vehicle is required to be able to provide assistance (medical, dismounted or direct fire support) and request further casualty evacuation or Counter-IED (C-IED) support. The organization of the OMLT, with small Company Mentor teams dispersed on the ground, makes vehicle movement a challenge. Each Company mentor team or P-OMLT PSS Mentor team has only 1 vehicle. This means that they are effectively tied to the ground unless they can be augmented to support vehicle movement. Movement restrictions for the rest of the Task Force, which require minimum 3 Type A (F Echelon) vehicles for all movements, cannot be applied to OMLT. OMLT was authorized to move with two type A vehicles augmented by ANA or ANP vehicles (LTV Ford Rangers in most cases) to give the required three vehicles. Even freeing-up two Type A Veh is a challenge, generally solved by attaching the Kandak Senior Mentor's vehicle and crew to the Coy level teams to allow them to move. This does not work for many OMLT SP and P-OMLT PSS, where the dispersed nature of their deployment means that they are fixed to their locations unless reinforced by other Canadian BG or other coalition assets. These isolated PSS become totally isolated, and in many cases can only be reached by aviation assets or a Combat Team with Expedient Route Opening Capability (EROC) or a Route Clearance Package (RCP). The IED threat which limits and affects movement for all forces on the ground paralyzes OMLT and POMLT teams deployed to isolated locations.



Photo : Cpl Simon Duchesne

### THE OPERATIONAL CYCLE

Like our forces, the ANA requires individual and collective training time in order to assimilate lessons learned and improve overall skills. While being deployed on operations develops real-life skills, career progression and attrition mean that the Kandaks require time to rest and train in order to improve their combat efficiency. This is done through what is known as the Red-Yellow-Green Cycle.

It comprises Yellow Cycle training for roughly two months at the individual and collective level, usually up to Coy level in a Kandak context. This training has also included the introduction of the C7 rifle to the Kandaks of 1-205 Corps Kandaks, beginning in Jan 08. Training is conducted by the ANA with OMLT mentorship.

Once Yellow Cycle training is complete, the Kandaks deploy for a period of 6 months in the Green Cycle in order to conduct operations alongside their OMLT and coalition counterparts. Following the Green Cycle, the ANA has roughly 1 month for Red Cycle leave and refit prior to recommencing the Yellow Cycle.



As absence without leave is dealt with differently in the ANA than in our forces (a soldier can be AWOL for up to 30 days before his pay is stopped, and is welcomed back whenever he arrives) it is sometimes difficult to plan for Yellow Cycle training as you do not really know when you will have the Kandak at full strength. This is one of those cultural quirks that you have to accept in the OMLT and try to mitigate through focused training in the latter portion of the Yellow Cycle.

### CONCLUSION

The OMLT can be seen as the exit strategy for the Canadian Forces from Afghanistan by helping to meet the Afghanistan Compact (Feb 2006) aim: "NATO-led International Security Assistance Force (ISAF), the US-led Operation Enduring Freedom (OEF) and partner nations involved in security sector reform will continue to provide strong support to the Afghan Government in establishing and sustaining security and stability in Afghanistan, subject to participating states' national approval procedures. They will continue to strengthen and develop the capacity of the national security forces to ensure that they become fully functional."<sup>3</sup> The ANA is progressing slowly and steadily towards this aim, monitored by the OMLT and assessed monthly by Capability Milestones. As Kandaks become more proficient at the various skills required, from sustainment and institutional learning to planning and conduct of operations, the size and function of the OMLT should decrease. The end-state will see the ANA fully capable of operating independently to ensure the security of their country. This is a long process but is the only way to ensure that coalition forces are not embroiled in a decades-long conflict abroad. Being part of the OMLT is a rewarding (if sometimes frustrating) job which is critical to the long-term autonomy and success of the ANSF.

---

<sup>3</sup> [http://www.nato.int/isaf/docu/epub/pdf/afghanistan\\_compact.pdf](http://www.nato.int/isaf/docu/epub/pdf/afghanistan_compact.pdf)