

After Action Report: Nuanced Diplomacy in Zerok, Afghanistan

By Captain John G. Gibson, U.S. Army

ENEMY MACHINE GUN FIRE and Rocket Propelled Grenades (RPGs) slammed into my convoy as two tracer rounds punched through the turret of my up armored vehicle. My third firefight in four days and the summer was only starting. It was mid-June 2007 in the mountains of the sprawling Paktika Province. I quickly realized that the enemy knew my name, number of vehicles, departure times and plans; I had just left a meeting with its informants, the Zerok tribal *shura*.

I was a company commander responsible for Sar Hawzeh, Naka and Zerok districts in northern Paktika Province. Zerok district is part of the Zadran tribal arc. The Zadran tribes span from the mountains of Pakistan's Waziristan tribal areas to the Afghan cities of Khost and Ghazni. The Zadran claim, as one of their own, the pro-Taliban leader Jalaluddin Haqqani. After six years of progress in Afghanistan, Zerok district remained a haven for foreign fighters, Taliban, Haqqani network fighters and corrupt government officials. In May 2007, however, the 10th Mountain Division created a series of small combat outposts near and along the Afghan-Pakistan border, and I inherited a combat outpost called Zerok COP. The outpost housed a small number of paratroopers and a large mortar tube. It was co-located with an Afghan National Army (ANA) contingent and shared a wall with the Zerok District Center. I was able to quickly interact with the tribal leaders (the *shura*) and the district governor. Upon the departure of my counterpart, the Zerok COP was ready for operations. Zerok district would become the setting for a lesson in corruption, violence and hope.

Identify the Problem

Zerok district sits as the most northern district in Paktika Province. Paktika comprises 18 districts that create a border province in the southeast of Afghanistan. The capital is the city of Sharona. Nine districts form eastern Paktika, the Area of Operation Eagle. Zerok district consists of two main unpaved roads, 9,000-11,000 foot mountains, and people from the Zadran

tribe. Two sub-tribes in Zerok make up the population base of the district. The people subsist on farming and small trade. The district is approximately 33 square miles and sits just 12 miles from the Pakistan border.

Corruption and collusion were the bedrock of Taliban operations focused on the destabilization of Zerok district. The first three weeks of my deployment consisted of several operations designed to simply assess the environment and create relationships with local district leaders, Afghan National

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Police, elders and *shura* members. Counter-insurgency doctrine states that creating separation between the enemy and the people is the first step of transforming the environment. I spent the month of May and the first two weeks of June 2007 attempting to create separation by using a technique called Key Leader Engagement (KLE), or Village Engagement (VE). My company completed a series of patrols focused on meeting as many Afghans as possible in the neighboring district of Naka.

I had one platoon at the Zerok COP and planned to re-enforce the outpost with my headquarters, another platoon and several jingle trucks.¹ On June 13, however, one of my platoons responded to an attack along the only useable road leading to the Zerok COP. Enemy fighters engaged a combat engineer route assessment patrol with machine gun, RPG and AK-74 fire. My platoon responded and was also engaged in a firefight with the same insurgents. The following day, my headquarters, several jingle trucks, an ANA platoon and a U.S. platoon moved up the same route to re-enforce the Zerok COP. That convoy

was also engaged. This time, the enemy was able to kill two ANA soldiers and damage several vehicles.

I immediately met with the elders, *shura* members, the district governor and the ANP chief at the Zerok District Center. I discussed security, governance and development in the district. I asked the *shura* members if they knew anything about the enemy forces operating in the area. The entire room responded with a resounding “no.” Frustrated by the response, I reminded the group that jobs and economic development were impossible without security.

I moved my entire convoy element back down the route to Forward Operating Base Orgun. My battalion was planning a major operation in the Zerok area and we were to start preparations and rehearsals during the next few days. We departed Zerok COP under cover of darkness. Five miles south of my outpost we were hit again. My convoy stayed the night at the location of the firefight. We spent the next 24 hours combing the area, talking to Afghans and searching for intelligence. A tip came from an unexpected source. One of my paratroopers received a tip from a police officer at the Zerok COP. Sharing a coveted American cigarette, the policeman told us that the Taliban were in the district center and knew the exact moment our patrol departed the COP for FOB Orgun. It turned out that enemy forces were operating in the district center that shared a wall with my combat outpost. This, of course, caused me to suspect that many of my Afghan leaders were enemy or openly supporting them.

Taking a Hard Line: No Development

My district was rife with enemy corruption and active collusion. I had two *shura* members and a district governor that began meeting with me in secret. One of my platoon leaders confirmed that the police chief actually allowed the Taliban to climb into the towers of the district center to survey our activities. The district governor was disillusioned with the provincial government by a personality conflict with the provincial governor. He was also ineffective due to the elders and members of the *shura* being a de facto Taliban organization. Only two individuals in Zerok pursued me to talk seriously about the problems

¹ “Jingle trucks” are local flat-bed vehicles that are used for transport purposes.

facing the people of Zerok district.

Two elders became my trusted agents and the core of my battalion commander's security *shura* initiative. LTC Michael R. Fenzel ordered us to develop trusted agents that would discuss important issues honestly. Not to be confused with intelligence sources, the security *shura* members talked about politics, personalities, development, governance and security. My two security *shura* men began to make secret trips to visit me, and over cups of hot chi told me how to proceed with Zerok. They explained that the Taliban were directly testing the will of my unit and, further, the task force. I decided to take a hard line with the Zerok *shura*. I called a meeting in the district center and admonished the tribal council for not providing security for the people of Zerok and informed the council that no new economic project would come to Zerok until security was established. I told the *shura* that my forces and the ANA would inform the people of Zerok that the *shura* decided no projects or humanitarian and civic assistance should come to the district. The meeting was terrible and the elders were upset.

The two security *shura* men were surprised at this decision. They later reported that the *shura* fully expected me to announce the start of an economic initiative. The head of the *shura*, Haji Tadai, was furious. Haji Tadai's nephew was a Taliban commander in northern Paktika Province, working for Haqqani. The situation in Zerok was treacherous, and the next 11 months proved difficult and violent. In 13 months, my company fired more than 3,590 120mm mortar rounds, directed 79 airstrikes, participated in 21 firefights, received 43 enemy rocket and mortar attacks and spent more than \$2 million on projects in districts other than Zerok.

Small Steps of Progress

We continued to engage the population of Zerok in meetings, patrols and behind closed doors. My battalion was able to assist me in removing three corrupt police officials. The provincial government replaced the district governor twice. We talked to the people and continued to spend money in other districts. The elders continued to harbor the Taliban as attacks persisted and security waned. The resounding theme

of each weekly meeting was projects. Repeatedly, the *shura* suggested that projects would benefit the district. I continued to remind the leaders that security was the only requirement. Meanwhile, my other two districts flourished with projects. New road construction, well construction projects, and humanitarian and civic assistance missions took place in each district, except Zerok.

In March 2008, I began to plan projects for Zerok district as preparation for improved security. A municipal water system for a small village, two new water wells, three mosque refurbishments, a flood abatement wall, a solar light array, two school roofs and a food distribution were announced to the *shura*. The projects represented an employment opportunity for more than 150 Afghans. The members of the *shura* began to claim allegiance to the government and provide names of contractors. The contracts began, and for the first time in a year attacks stopped. The district remained quiet for 47 days. Enemy activity was reported by locals in the bazaar, Afghan contractors and several *shura* members. I was confident that the population was effectively separated from the enemy. Real transformation seemed possible for the first time.

Conclusion

Zerok District is a microcosm of Afghanistan. Day-to-day life in the area has not changed drastically in the last 200 years. The people have vehicles and a few telephones, yet farming and family ties rule the day. The situation in Zerok is ripe for progress. For example, compare this small area with the progress of the area surrounding Kabul or even the provincial seat, Sharona. The government of Afghanistan makes improvements and reaches the people near significant population centers, but small districts such as Zerok are not relevant to the provincial or national government. Nevertheless, the government must focus on remote, isolated, under-developed districts. Taliban and forces opposed to the Afghan government place critical importance on the mental and physical disposition of districts such as Zerok. Remote districts, left unattended, provide the Taliban with sanctuary, food, men, weapons and fertile ground for continued opposition to the Afghan

government. Projection of Afghan security and Afghan governance in the sanctuary of an insurgent force will sway the people of Zerok far greater than a thousand projects or an outpost. I often thought about the challenges of leaders in past conflicts and kept returning to this quote by T.E. Lawrence from *The Seven Pillars of Wisdom*: "[War] upon rebellion was messy and slow, like eating soup with a knife." War in districts such as Zerok is slow and messy indeed.

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