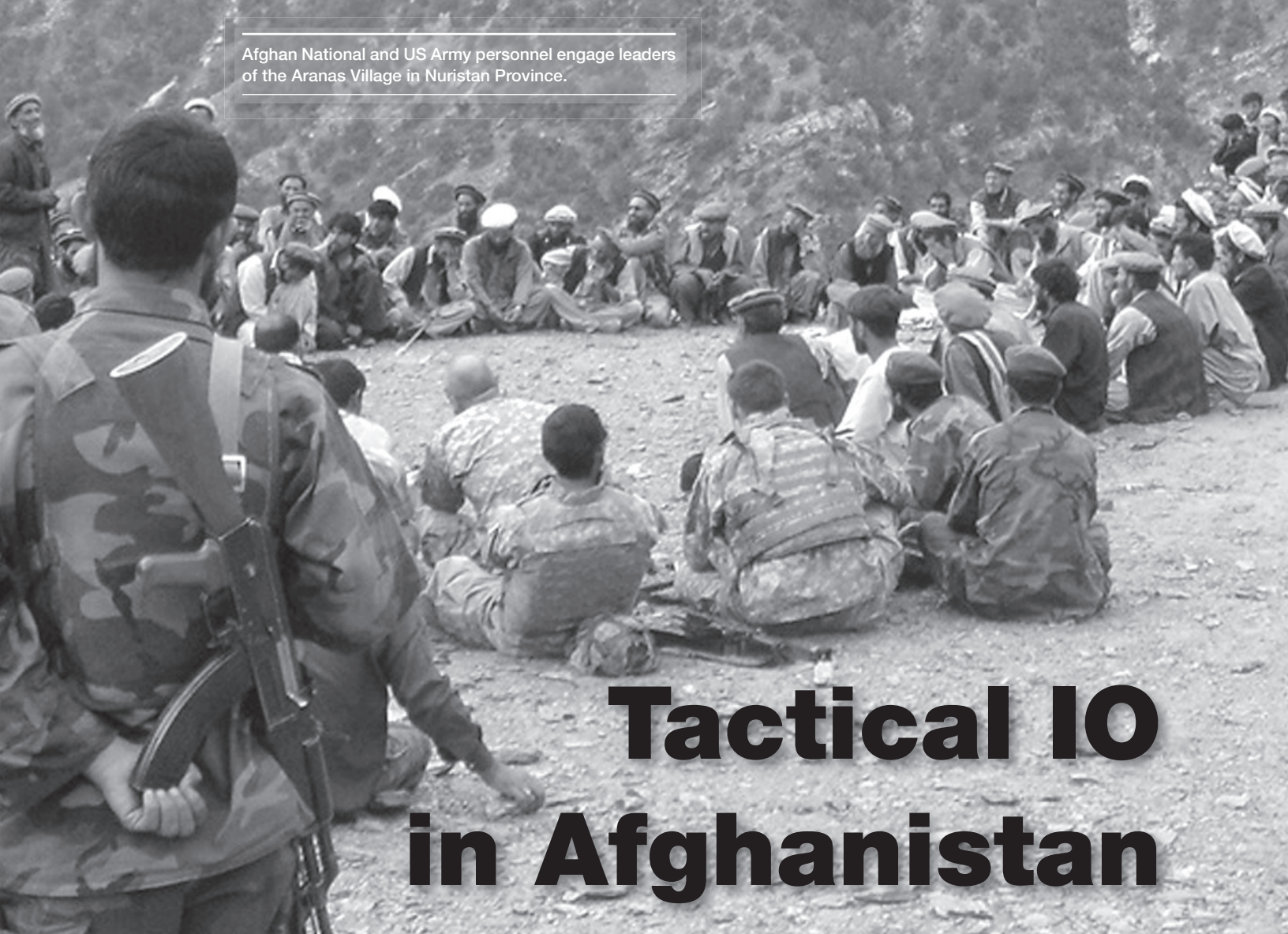Afghan National and US Army personnel engage leaders of the Aranas Village in Nuristan Province.

Tactical IO in Afghanistan

—What the FSO Needs to Know

Information operations (IO) is a key combat multiplier for the maneuver commander that now falls squarely on the shoulders of fire supporters at every level. The addition of the role of IO coordinator to the fire support officer's (FSO's) job means Artillery officers can expect to spend the majority of their nonlethal efforts developing and managing information campaigns. As the training of Field Artillery (FA) personnel in the realm of IO continues to expand for both officers and NCOs, fire supporters will contribute more than ever to success on the battlefield.

Everything that a unit does is IO. This simple statement leads to the larger truth—a counterinsurgency is an effort to persuade the population to support the government; so lethal operations support IO, not vice versa.

By Captain Andrew J. Knight, FA

In this effort to gain the population's support, the actions of a unit speak volumes to the people and enemy about capabilities, attitudes and cultural understanding. Whether it is a conversation with the locals or a firefight with the enemy, Soldiers are managing perceptions. When leaders meet with local "power brokers," the desired end state is to manage local leaders' perceptions about the topic of discussion, the purpose of the operation or the value the US and Afghan security force presence adds to their lives.

The enemy also is trying to manage perceptions. His IO campaign has an advantage over the unit's because he knows the people better, having lived among them. The enemy also doesn't always deal in *facts,* which creates frustration on the counter-IO side; this seeming advantage is inevitably the enemy's downfall because it is easily overcome.

In our portion of Afghanistan, most enemy leaders did not view their IO as part of a long-term goal and assumed they could create an advantage by releasing outrageous propaganda. However, when they repeatedly lied, it worked against them. As elsewhere in the world, in Afghanistan, all liars eventually are discovered as such.

The trick for the IO officer is to hasten that discovery. This usually depends on the FSO's ability to demonstrate the truth to the population. In a rural environment where the people have little education, this can be difficult at times because news travels fastest by word of mouth, leaving

the less educated more apt to believe everything they hear. The susceptibility of an isolated rural population to rumor and propaganda characterized our IO operating environment in northeastern Afghanistan for 1st Battalion, 32nd Infantry Regiment (1-32 IN), *The Chosin Battalion,* in the 3rd Brigade Combat Team (BCT), 10th Mountain Division, deployed for Operation Enduring Freedom (OEF) VII.

The task of training units in IO is enormous, and the length of our training rotations at the National Training Center, Fort Irwin, California, and Joint Readiness Training Center, Fort Polk, Louisiana, did not allow us to achieve major goals, objectives and perception changes. It takes months to truly understand an area of operation (AO) and the population set—and months more to craft an IO plan that will cause a target population to view things from your perspective.

Based on my experience as a battalion FSO—called an effects coordinator (ECOORD)—responsible for 1-32 IN's IO campaign for 16 months in rural Afghanistan, I am writing this article to help future FSOs manage IO campaigns more effectively.

Pre-Deployment Preparation. To get started, you truly must "do your homework" on your future AO. If you are going to Afghanistan and think the

people in your sector are Arab, then you already are "behind the power-curve." They are Pashtun.

The enemy you will face has the advantage of already knowing the people and culture better than you will on the day you step on the airplane to redeploy. To counter this advantage, you must do all you can to understand not only Islam, but also the local customs and key personalities in your AO.

Study the people and culture in your AO. The study of the Pashtun culture was at the center of our preparation. There are a few books that will give you a basic understanding of customs. Books such as *Pashtun Tales,* at first reading, appear to be a collection of incomplete stories and broken logic chains. (*Pashtun Tales* was edited by Aisha Ahmad and Roger Boase and published by Saqi Books, London, on 4 July 2003.) However, the book made me realize that the Pashtun people have a different perception of the world in general. This helped me to recognize that trying to understand the Pashtun culture by "mirror-imaging" my own thought processes would not help me influence the culturally different local population.

Before deploying to Afghanistan, we built IO "target" folders on provincial and district leaders as well as any elders or other key communicators in every village we could find. A target

folder should contain the person's name, father's name, tribe, sub-tribe, any historical reporting on the individual, a summary of past engagements with military forces, and, most importantly, a photograph of the person. (In Iraq, information about whether the target is Sunni or Shiite is also important.) The more information you can gather on the IO target, the better you will understand the local population.

There are many sources for this information, including previous unit reports and the UN Assistance Mission to Afghanistan (UNAMA) and provincial reconstruction team (PRT) web pages. Making contact with the unit currently responsible for the AO can provide invaluable IO information and help you build target folders.

This information will shape your initial IO plan, but more importantly, it will start your company commanders out "on the right foot" with the population. The perfect scenario for a company commander is to receive an information packet on a village from his company FSO that contains all the information required to walk in and greet the local power brokers without being surprised by any issue that may arise.

Refine IO theme guidance from higher headquarters. Your higher headquarters will provide IO themes for initial operations. These themes will be broad and

Lieutenant Colonel Christopher Cavoli, Commander of 1st Battalion, 32nd Infantry (1-32 IN), and Captain Joe Evans, Commander of B Company, hold a shura with the elders of the Watapor District in the Kunar Province.

generally tied to lines of operations (LOOs) in the campaign plan.

You must refine these themes to make them apply to the target population in your own area. The key to creating battalion and company talking points from higher level themes is the specificity that you add.

The ability to craft messages that the people will not only understand, but also pass on to their relatives and neighbors is the key to managing perceptions for an entire district or province. The brigade headquarters has such a wide target set that it is virtually impossible to provide talking points that will resonate in all battalion or company areas.

For instance, convincing an urban population that the government can provide security for the population is much easier than trying to convince a rural population of the same thing. Cities have a higher concentration of law enforcement the world over, and citizens generally see police officers everyday. Those living in rural villages not connected by a main road may see a police officer less than once a week, making it more difficult to convince villagers of the security benefits the government provides through its policing effort.

In this case, actions speak louder than words. The best IO theme a battalion in a rural area can receive from a higher headquarters is an objective that physically demonstrates the IO theme, such as providing or helping the Afghan forces provide security for the population.

As the new IO coordinator, you will want to be guided through a step-by-step process to reach a stated objective. Our initial attempt at crafting talking points was probably not very effective because we did not fully understand the population and did not have their trust.

The operations order (OPORD) from my higher headquarters contained nothing but themes developed from the various LOOs. As a new battalion ECOORD, my first request for information (RFI) to higher headquarters was something to the effect of, "What do I say to these people to make them believe that?" The answer is strikingly simple: you link your desired reaction to factors that motivate your population. With time, you learn not only what to say, but also how to say it—as long as you stay actively engaged in seeking feedback from your efforts.

The key is to study what does and does not work, revise/continue your IO approach, study what does and does not work—in a continuous functional loop. It

is critically important during this learning phase to spot mistakes and correct them with the locals. Mistakes made in the learning phase can ruin the campaign if not handled quickly.

The way a talking point is presented is almost as important as what you say—sometimes more important. Methods of speech, greetings, proper behavior during opening prayers, removing shoes when entering a shura (an elders' meeting), removing sunglasses when meeting people, taking off body armor and weapons as a sign of respect and trust for the people you're meeting with, staying for lunch, asking about the elder's health and the health of his sons—all these can determine the effectiveness of your message. There is no "magic vault" of information that will immediately tell you how your population will react to new stimuli—you must know your target population and learn from your mistakes and successes.

Once you have the confidence and ability to manage the perceptions of your area's population, you will understand that themes are all that are necessary to accomplish the IO goals of your higher headquarters.

There is one truth that the IO coordinator must realize from the start: nobody should know more about the target population than you do. You must absorb information like a sponge and learn what factors contribute to the local decision-making process. You enlist the help of all Soldiers and NCOs in the battalion. Soldiers and NCOs provide feedback directly from the population.

Learning from your mistakes and successes will benefit your IO campaign the most. If a message is passed to the population and it causes them to take an aloof position in dealing with your unit, then you might want to reevaluate the statement and determine where you have erred while quickly hustling to control the damage it caused to the overall relationship. It took approximately four months of tireless reading of daily reports, debriefings and case studies to form a methodology that allowed our unit to manage how the population reacted to the messages we disseminated.

Reach a common understanding and mutual trust with the people. To influence the perceptions of your target population, you must reach a common understanding with them. This is the point where you comprehend what the target population believes and grasp their motivations. To reach this understanding, your target

population must trust you as looking out for their best interests.

The easiest way to achieve trust is to tell the locals you are going to do something and then do it. With them, you develop a common goal, work to reach that goal together, then give them all the credit for accomplishing it, regardless of who did "the heavy lifting."

This will be in stark contrast to the enemy who always takes credit for the slightest success, never attributing success to anyone but himself. Your target population will see the difference.

The enemy in Afghanistan struggles with his own inability to show the population tangible results. The people constantly weigh both sides of the conflict to determine which side to support based on which side will provide the most benefits.

To gain the support of the people, you must show that siding with the enemy not only brings no progress, but also destroys progress already achieved. The enemy cannot counter this argument, no matter how hard he tries, and any repeated attempts at degrading the positive impact your unit is having on people inevitably will work against him.

It is difficult for the average villager to believe that your unit's presence is a hindrance to his village when his son just started attending the new school your unit built or his family is receiving humanitarian assistance blankets in the middle of a cold winter.

By continuously attacking your good will toward the people, the enemy alienates himself from the people. A good IO campaign can expand that alienation and provide a unit the required maneuver space to destroy the enemy in a location that does not endanger the population.

Spread the message and build relationships. The three mediums most commonly used to reach the population are engaging the people face-to-face, broadcasting on the radio and distributing print products. The two most effective in our area have been engagements with the population and radio broadcasting.

The local populace propagating an IO theme is more effective than any other method of distribution. The most effective tool in disseminating messages to the population is the daily interaction of Soldiers with locals. From our initial operation, our battalion commander emphasized Soldiers living among the population whenever possible. Our unit did not conduct daily patrols from a forward operating base (FOB) with

Soldiers of C/1-32 IN engage locals along the unimproved Pech Valley Road. In cooperation with village elders and local sub-governors, C Company improved this rough road so the people could have a trafficable road to their provincial government.

a few villages targeted each week, but constantly cohabitated with the people we wished to influence. This allowed the population to become aware of our presence at all times and for them to see that we do not have the undesirable characteristics that our enemy tried to lead them to believe.

The daily contact brings with it a level of familiarity from which trust eventually will grow. Establishing the trust of the population is essential for using IO to shape operations.

Other than the generally friendly nature of Pashtuns, village elders will continue to seek audience with your unit because they *want* to believe you will make their lives easier and create a future for their children. The overall battle for perception management is decided by the population's constant cost-benefit analysis.

Mutual trust is the first building block of establishing a relationship. Soldiers are your units' best means of gaining the population's trust. Local kids look up to our Soldiers as heroes, and Soldiers love

that. They naturally engage children, and everyone loves someone who loves children.

When the people no longer just want what you have to offer but want *you,* the conditions are set to move to the next level: turning things over to your trusted friends in the Afghan security forces.

Our second most effective tool in our IO campaign was FM radio. The most difficult task is building a listening audience. But it was not until our tactical psychological operations (PSYOP) team (TPT) conducted a survey of the population and found out what the people wanted to hear were we able to reach the mainstream. We made programming changes, such as playing the popular Pashto "Top Ten," local news and announcements from government officials and religious or population leaders. These changes built an audience that now complains at the front gate if the radio misses one day of broadcasting.

We also created a jingle that linked the station with a village or event and hired a

news reporter from the local population. We placed repeaters on the surrounding mountains to expand our broadcasting area by more than 200 percent.

Achieve the IO end state. Once you've established mutual trust, you can start to bring a level of complexity to your IO plan. The complexity will come with the introduction of objectives to support your goals and the unit's ability to measure the population's understanding of these objectives. For example, there are certain objective themes that are advantageous for the population to believe, such as "The enemy brings nothing but pain and suffering." This promotes the people's trusting the US and Afghan security forces—the goal.

Convincing the people that the enemy causes pain and suffering sounds simple, on the surface. But an enemy is often a person your target population has known for quite some time, so the people may not accept this objective theme easily. Therefore, you must use an intermediate IO step to achieve the objective—and, ultimately, the goal.

The intermediate IO step to support the example objective theme can be something like repeatedly asking if the enemy ever takes things from the people. Next you wait for a catalyst, such as an enemy attack against your forces in the vicinity of the population, and talk about the enemy's actions as proof of your IO objective theme.

It is often unwise in an IO plan to try to convince the population of the end state from the beginning because of the relationships between the population and the enemy.

Manage negative consequences. Inevitably throughout the course of fighting the war in Afghanistan or in Iraq, there will be undesirable events that harm a unit's relationship with the population. The nature of our business is dangerous, and in some cases, confusing. Events can include some harm to the local population of your AO. When this occurs, your solid relationships with key local communicators are more important than ever. It is easy for the enemy to capitalize on your mistakes, but it makes his job more difficult when a local leader openly continues his support for the security forces.

The trust of the population is immensely important because the people must believe you did not harm the innocent population intentionally.

There still will be backlashes from the incident, but mitigating the overall negative effects can allow progress to continue with the population. Meeting with the population quickly after the incident to discuss it gives the people a forum in which to vent their anger and frustration. This is uncomfortable but necessary to heal the damaged relationship.

After the elders have publicly aired their grievances, it helps to remind them of your sorrow for their losses and emphasize steps you both will take to prevent it from happening again. You also can mention the good things the security forces' presence have brought to the area and how future cooperation will ensure a better future for everyone.

Your next step is to allow the local nationals friendly to your cause to bring your unit back into the population's favor. After all, if you are successfully demonstrating your power against the enemy and providing the population with tangible goods and services, it only will be a short time before the event is forgotten.

Ignoring the event in the hopes that it will "blow over" is the best way to ensure that your relationship with the population is permanently damaged.

Tie the IO plan together. When we first arrived in Afghanistan, there was a distinct need for a road in the Pech River Valley of the Kunar Province. There is a large population in the Pech Valley that needed an easily trafficable road to tie it to its provincial government. The district sub-governors provided input from the beginning on the number of workers and security guards hired from their districts. Once the contractor agreed with the number of local laborers and security guards as well as the salary paid to each, the elders from each district were called in for a shura. At this shura, the elders received a briefing on the plan for road construction. The contractor was introduced to the elders in the Pech Valley so he would not be a stranger to them. The district sub-governors ensured that a proportionate number of the population from each village was employed throughout the contract.

The relationship between the contractor and the populace required daily maintenance. The foremen for the different road segments settled many disputes on their own, but the ultimate authority in the area remained the district sub-governors and C/1-32 IN. When the population took issue with the contractor, the person or persons tended to address the issue with the Soldiers, whom they trusted. Not wanting to solve Afghan problems, the company commander addressed the issue with the relevant district sub-governor and allowed him to mediate the disagreement to derive an equitable solution for all parties. In short, he empowered the sub-governors among their people while he opened the Pech Valley to the support of the provincial government.

The main theme used by US and Afghan security forces and the district sub-governors when they confronted issues related to the road's construction is "Everyone will benefit from the road." In the end, the people understood that the road was key to their economic growth, education, health care and future employment. When officials received a complaint about some perceived inequity, reminding them of the overall betterment for Afghanistan generally quelled the dispute.

Face-to-face engagements with the population increased greatly when the road work began. The military-aged males, once left idly at home or with

weapons in their hands, were employed in areas that had heavy volumes of security forces traffic.

The short traffic delays created by the roadwork allowed Soldiers to talk to the workers or others. Simple talking points about the road's benefits to the area and Afghanistan as a whole helped gain the people's trust.

This road is a capstone IO event made possible by C Company's initial groundwork of living among the population for an entire year. Most locals along the road recognized individual Americans and Afghan soldiers and greeted them readily. The battalion disseminated IO themes to the entire population in a matter of hours as opposed to days or weeks. Delivering the messages that way is not as instantaneous as via radio, but the personal nature of sharing information face-to-face brings much more credibility to the messages.

Owning the ground and not running from a fight convinces the population that you are stronger than the enemy. The people always recognize who remains at the end of a lethal engagement. Artillery and mortar fires, while deadly to the enemy, also reinforce the people's perceptions of the security forces' capabilities. Our battalion fired more than 2,100 artillery and 2,650 mortar missions this year. The addition of IO to the workload of fire supporters increased the relevance of our artillerymen in counterinsurgency operations.

In northeastern Afghanistan, lethal and nonlethal effects were intertwined so closely that the FSO had two full-time jobs. However, the jobs and the FSO are a natural fit: when one officer is responsible for both the overall message and the fires that support those messages, great effects are possible.

Captain Andrew J. Knight, Field Artillery (FA), until recently, was deployed in support of Operation Enduring Freedom VII as the Effects Coordinator (ECOORD) for 1st Battalion, 32nd Infantry (1-32 IN), 3rd Brigade Combat Team (BCT), 10th Mountain Division, northeastern Afghanistan. While deployed to Iraq during Operation Iraqi Freedom I, he was the S4 of the 17th FA Brigade, part of III Corps Artillery. In 1-12 FA, also in III Corps Artillery, he served as the Battalion S4, Battalion Ammunition Officer/Headquarters Battery Executive Officer and a Platoon Leader at Fort Sill, Oklahoma. He is a graduate of the Ranger and Airborne Schools, both at Fort Benning, Georgia.