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Adapting to improve: the Odyssey of the operational mentoring and liaison teams of the United Kingdom, the Netherlands and Belgium

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Citation

Wiltenburg, I. L. (2024, September 18). *Adapting to improve: the Odyssey of the operational mentoring and liaison teams of the United Kingdom, the Netherlands and Belgium*. Retrieved from <https://hdl.handle.net/1887/4092632>

Version: Publisher's Version

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Adapting to Improve

*The Odyssey of the Operational Mentoring
and Liaison Teams of the United Kingdom,
the Netherlands and Belgium*

Ivor Leon Wiltenburg

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ISBN: 9789493124349

Typography and design: Merel de Hart, Multimedia NLDA

Cover: Gerben van Es, Mediacentrum Defensie

Printed by: Repro FBD

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Adapting to Improve:

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the Netherlands and Belgium*

Proefschrift
ter verkrijging van
de graad van doctor aan de Universiteit Leiden,
op gezag van rector magnificus prof.dr.ir. H. Bijl,
volgens besluit van het college voor promoties
te verdedigen op woensdag 6 september 2023 klokke 12:30 uur

door

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geboren te Gouda in 1981

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This dissertation was financially and factually supported by the Royal Netherlands Army and Ministry of Defence. The views and opinions in this dissertation are and remain solely the responsibility of the author and do not necessarily reflect those of the Ministry of Defence

Acknowledgements

Acknowledgements

After an eventful and rewarding period of serving as an infantry officer in the Dutch Army, I was given the opportunity to kick-start a second career as an academic by pursuing a PhD at the Netherlands Defence Academy. However, quite a discrepancy exists between commanding a company of infantrymen and being an academic, and I may state without reservation that acclimatisation was required before I started to feel at home in my new work environment. Whilst adapting, I quickly found that the faculty is studded with great people with whom one could share a laugh and a beer and that much could be learned from my new colleagues. Having spent such an extended period researching, writing and reviewing, I am most grateful to those at the FMW who have made this period such an enjoyable period in my life.

First and foremost I would like to thank dr. Martijn van der Vorm. Embarked on the PhD journey simultaneously, I am most grateful for your company over the years. I greatly appreciate your friendship, support, humour, analyses, worldview and example, and I am truly honoured that you are standing next to me during the defence of my thesis with Erik.

Similarly to Martijn, I am much obliged to Lysanne Leeuwenburg. During the elaborate process of authoring two books in as many years, we have become close friends, and I am in awe of your ability to combine your work ethos, intellect and planning capabilities. I look forward to your PhD thesis and am very excited to jointly supervise that project.

Naturally, both of my supervisors have been instrumental in completing this project. First, I would like to express my gratitude to my promotor prof. dr. Frans Osinga for your ability to identify and address the strengths and weaknesses of my work. Also, thanks for your trust in my research progress and for allowing me to work as a visiting fellow at Oxford University. Prof. dr. Martijn Kitzen, I am very appreciative of your mentorship and guidance. Thank you for your support academically, professionally and personally.

I would like to thank the following people at the academy for a host of different reasons, but mainly because you are great people. In descending order of loudness, I would like to thank Ivar van der Steen, always happy to join forces, whether as cadets, in a company or here at the academy. Happy to have you as a mate in the class of 2001. Gijs Tuinman, the man with the most great ideas per minute and a great lighthearted attitude. I would like to thank Pepijn Tuinier for your friendship, laughs, coffee and great stories, and I appreciate being reacquainted after so many years. I would like to thank dr. Mirjam Grandia for paving the way for us officer/scholars, and for your enduring encouragement during my PhD journey. Marnix Provoost and Tess Horlings have been very supportive fellow PhD candidates, and I have greatly valued your companionship. Lastly, I am much obliged to mrs. Vibeke Gootzen

for your great assistance to my PhD project, as well as your valuable contributions to our joint publications.

For supporting my research endeavours, I am indebted to mrs. T. Patrick of the FMW, mr. Eric van Oosten (NIMH) and mrs. Merel de Hart. Lastly, I would like to thank prof. dr. Paul Ducheine for all his efforts to create the Dutch Army's officer/scholar programme and his guidance over the last five years.

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Prologue

The intricacies of security force assistance became apparent to me in the summer of 2007 when confronted with the twists and turns of working with the Afghan National Army (ANA) during my first deployment to Afghanistan. Although a formative experience for any young officer, being attached to a so-called Operational Mentoring and Liaison Team (OMLT) introduced me to new perspectives on the variety of tasks required of Dutch Army personnel. As part of an early OMLT rotation, we had to glue together a mixed team of six unacquainted men during a short pre-deployment training, and prepare for a task we had only the flimsiest understanding of: who were these Afghan soldiers? What were their capabilities? How were they equipped? What type of operations would be conducted? How would we be supported? Most of these questions were only answered—albeit in part—upon arrival in Uruzgan province, Afghanistan.

During the deployment, we had to come to terms with the bureaucracy of the Dutch Army, the lurking Taliban insurgency in Uruzgan and, most importantly, the distinctive Afghan warrior culture. Being somewhat familiar with dealing with the Army's bureaucracy, and having little influence on the insurgents' behaviour, the latter aspect especially was cause for reflection *ex post*. How did we end up doing this type of work? We did not speak the local language and we were not quite selected for our diplomatic skills and ability to quickly build rapport with indigenous people. Moreover, we lacked certain aspects that command respect amongst our Afghan colleagues: we were younger than our new Afghan friends, which was troublesome in a society that values seniority. We were outranked by our mentees and lacked *wasta* amongst the Dutch Battlegroup and Task Force. Nonetheless, we went about our assignment, bright-eyed and bushy-tailed, making the most of our situation in the best traditions of the Dutch Army.

Several years after redeploying, the realisation dawned that being part of the OMLT had been quite an exceptional experience. Mentoring an indigenous force during operations—or more colloquially, experiencing the utter chaos of combat whilst embedded with, what seemed to us, a rag-tag band of oddballs that had been recruited into the ANA—was quite dissonant with my Western-style military upbringing within the infantry. Indeed, the disciplined structuring of manoeuvres via our ingrained tactics, techniques and procedures was aimed to eviscerate any unnecessary emotions from fighting. Conversely, the shouting, the aimless discharge of fully automatic weapons and the complete disregard of friendly positions by the Afghans that we observed would turn out to be a shared experience amongst the many OMLT veterans interviewed for this dissertation. As the Afghan National Army improved somewhat thanks to many years of close cooperation with a host of international advisers, the Dutch Army withdrew from Uruzgan, and the OMLT, in 2010, leaving the ANA in the province far from its intended mark of operating independently.

Upon reflection, it transpired that mentoring during combat was a military activity with which the Dutch Army had no recent experience, nor had it any formal military discourse on this topic. Notwithstanding, a second tour, this time in Africa, reaffirmed that mentoring, training and advising was becoming a staple of the Dutch armed forces, and that the issues encountered in 2007 had not yet been solved in 2015. If training indigenous forces was becoming a mainstay for us, it looked somewhat anomalous that we as professional soldiers were still only preparing to fight a mechanised war we had been practising for since the dawn of the Cold War.

Simultaneous with the execution of training, advising and assistance operations by the Dutch Army, a discourse on that very topic sprang to life internationally. The term now adapted into NATO parlance for this type of operation is Security Force Assistance (SFA), and the Operational Mentoring and Liaison Teams in Afghanistan—or more broadly speaking, combat mentoring—was labelled as a variant of SFA. Upon scrutiny, SFA turned out to be quite a common military endeavour. The United States (US) armed forces had ample experience with SFA during the Korean and Vietnam Wars. Many types of collaborations had taken place in contemporary history, varying in interconnectedness, size, type, duration, location, legality, physical risk, domain and importance. Considering this abundance, the question remained why, in my observation, the Dutch Army had to reinvent the wheel as it commenced its participation in the Afghanistan War in 2006. This question marked the starting point of this academic journey into SFA, and more specific combat mentoring, which expanded into multiple case studies aiming to identify the lessons learned, and to gain an understanding of the institutionalising—or lack thereof—within the armed forces of the selected case studies.