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

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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 abundancy, 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.