

A Quick Review of Combat Outposts (COPs)

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The construction of Combat Outposts (COPs) by the U.S. military in Afghanistan and Iraq has been almost unanimously described in positive terms by defense analysts and military officers as a means through which to carry out its counterinsurgency efforts. Despite the existence of hundreds of COPs on today's battlefields, the term Combat Outpost is not even doctrinally defined in any military field manual. Soldiers in today's battlefields routinely reference COPs as anything from a patrol base to anything smaller than a Forward Operating Base. Doctrine notwithstanding, countless Soldiers and Marines today currently operate out of COPs.

No two COPs are alike. The most significant difference between any two COPs is its relation to an urban center. Urban COPs require much greater security requirements and oftentimes less infrastructure development, whereas COPs established in rural locations often have better natural defensive measures (stand off distance) while requiring more logistical and engineering support in order to sustain forces occupying the COP. COPs do not materialize overnight and this paper seeks to cover several aspects of COP building and establishment.

Location, Location, Location!

The most important concept in COP development is real-estate. Military forces cannot simply build on any land they choose, and if they do choose COP development haphazardly then the repercussions can be severe and deadly. For example, units should avoid establishing a COP at a water station or a critical essential service building because occupying a public works facility would only anger the local populace and estrange the citizenry from the US forces patrolling the area. Essential service buildings need to be secured but housing US forces in these buildings often hinder any necessary infrastructure improvement from occurring. Likewise, haphazardly constructing a COP in the middle of a date farmer's field could antagonize this individual since the land could be the sole source of economic revenue for the farmer and his family. In many cases, civilians seek to claim US government funds for U.S. occupied COPs built on private land. During my unit's deployment, one Iraqi farmer requested \$50,000 in payment because a COP was built on his pomegranate field. As a result, units must now inquire with the locals as to which land is claimed land breaking ground. Otherwise units risk COP construction being complicated by legal constraints and unhappy locals.

A practical approach to COP development is to mirror the mindset of a prospective home owner. Hence, many of the same questions which future homeowners ask themselves also apply in COP development, such as, who owns this land, how do they use it, and what are the financial

repercussions for establishing a COP on land owned by a local national? Will my primary and redundant comms systems be able to reach my parent unit? Can I exploit the geography of the land in terms of well digging and water availability? Will the burning of my trash waft into the COP or outside of it towards an abandoned field? COP building also requires a contrarian outlook, for Commanders often search for the most dangerous neighborhood to plant a COP rather than aiming to situate an outpost in an economic and secure locale.

Some COPs are even cultural, archaeological, and historical landmarks. For example, COP Blackfoot, located in Baghdad just south of Dora neighborhood within the Hadar region was formerly a Catholic church, abandoned since the start of the invasion because of an increase in sectarian killings in the region. Items in the library document the long and proud history of the Catholic Church in Iraq. US forces occupying this COP realize the importance of the historical collection within the church library and have sought to preserve these items to the best of their ability.

Conferring with the local Iraqi Security Forces (ISF) prior to building a COP is a good technique, as it will help ensure that a unit is not building in an area which the locals deem sensitive or critical. Units, and locals, should remember that COPs are usually not permanent structures. One unit's COP on a key terrain in their area of operations can 9 months later, serve as a logistical and operational encumbrance when that unit is asked to quickly displace to another location. Although a COP might be a temporary base for US forces, US forces can pass on these bases to their ISF counterparts. Hence, COPs can also easily become Iraqi security bases when US forces vacate the area. MG Mark Hertling, the Multi-National Division North Iraq Commanding General, quoted *Field of Dreams* by describing COPs as "if you build it, they will come." Implying, if US forces build COPs or security stations then the ISF will inhabit and fortify the locations. ISF rarely have the engineering or logistical requirements to build a full fledged security station. Therefore, recently abandoned U.S. COPs are ideal for both ISF needing a base and the U.S. forces that would otherwise have to spend time and money on deconstruction efforts.

In many cases, the most ideal location for a COP is adjacent to an ISF security station. In this case, US forces build a Joint Combat Outpost (JCOP) to house both US military and local national forces. JCOPs can prove to be force multipliers because the geographical proximity of US military forces with host nation forces aids in the development and professionalization of local national forces. Furthermore JCOPs help the two forces better synchronize operations and intelligence sharing. Lethal targeting, non-lethal targeting, and information operations are much more effective when intelligence and operations are synchronized amongst Coalition Forces. Furthermore, JCOPs reinforce in the minds of locals and security forces that the U.S. Military and the ISF are operating as one single entity.

A hasty occupation of a COP can have the advantage of surprise and shock against insurgents in that specific region. The drawback though is that these hasty COPs have a disadvantage logistically in that they are not conducive to support US forces for a prolonged period. Hasty COPs are best stood up in urban areas and in a counterinsurgent fight they serve as an infiltration tactic, and as a node from which units can expand like an ink blot. Whereby, US forces can gradually restore security and lines of communication in an otherwise violent locale.

Engineering

A conventional COP requires months of preparation and its gradual development does not provide the unit with the means to benefit from a tactical surprise. Commanders who wish to establish COPs need to ensure proper staff work and planning is done prior to breaking ground on the COP. Logistical, engineering, and force protection measures need to be adequately factored into COP construction.

A COP housing a company of Infantry Soldiers and some supporting elements (Field Feeding Team, Tactical Human Intelligence Team, and Medics) can have capabilities that provide the infantry unit with a broad range of facilities: Civil Military Operations Center (CMOC), Company Tactical Operations Center (TOC), Dining Facility, Aid station, Platoon Command Posts, latrine and shower units, motor pool, a living space area (LSA), Helicopter Landing Zone (HLZ), modified small arms range, and a burn pit.

Engineering for COPs is broken into two phases, the horizontal and then the vertical phase. The horizontal phase encompasses sight survey, leveling of the land, COP perimeter development, Helicopter landing zone, and in some cases, gravel spreading. Prior to the initiation of this phase, the unit should ensure there are sufficient Class IV supplies on hand: HESCOs of all dimensions, concertina wire, pickets, sandbags, and that a gravel contract has been submitted. Engineer work is a time consuming matter and Commanders should also be prepared to task Platoons on force protection missions to secure the engineers and their equipment as they construct the COP. Vertical engineer work requires experienced military engineers who are skilled in an array of specialties ranging from carpentry, plumbing, electrical work, and HVAC (heating, ventilation, and air conditioning). Prior to beginning vertical engineer work, the unit should ensure there are contracts submitted for generators, jersey barriers, force protection towers, t-walls, air conditioning units, electrical supplies (grid, switches, wiring), water resupply, and black water removal. If well digging vendors are available in the area, it is preferable to dig a well at the COP rather than having to rely on a vendor for water. Regardless of how the unit receives its water, the unit will still be reliant on bottled water for drinking purposes. Units should also ensure that they have field sanitation teams established in order to inspect the quality of the water. Medical units outside of the battalion can also be asked to verify and test the water in order to ensure that water coming from the well is free of pathogens, heavy metals, and of a sufficiently low turbidity (NTU) count.

Contracted Logistical Support

Conventional COPs as described above are not inexpensive and the cost for contracted equipment and labor can cost more than 1 million dollars. Below is a sample listing of prices for contracts submitted on behalf of a COP:

Contract	Cost
Fuel Tank	\$12,350.00
Clean water resupply and Black Water Removal	\$48,500.00
6 Guard Towers & 50 Jersey Barriers	\$81,200.00
Beds, Mattresses & Wall Lockers	\$89,000.00
500kW Generator with monthly maintenance plan	\$100,000.00
300 T-Walls (12 feet x 5 feet)	\$115,500.00
6 Tents (30 feet x 100 feet)	\$162,000.00
Electrical Supplies (breaker, cable, switches, pipes, lights)	\$127,000.00
Gravel (18,000 cubic yards of 1-1.5 inch of crushed gravel)	\$259,200.00
TOTAL COST	\$994,750.00

- A) A Fuel tank will enable the unit at the COP to not be completely reliant on combat logistical patrols for power generation. For generators over 500kw which consume large amounts of fuel daily, this is a requirement. Otherwise, for smaller generators this is unnecessary.
- B) Clean water resupply enables Soldiers to maintain hygiene while black water removal ensures that latrines and the camp area are free of human waste. Upon construction of the well, the unit should ensure that Preventive Medicine personnel test the water for cleanliness.
- C) Guard Towers and Jersey barriers: Absolutely necessary force protection items.
- D) Beds, Mattresses, and Wall Lockers: Unit dependent, not an absolute necessity.
- E) 500KW generator with monthly maintenance plan: A maintenance plan is a necessity for generators and the contracting office now mandates all generators purchased to have a maintenance plan. Ensure that the vendor drops off a generator that matches the statement of work. Some local national vendors will try to shortchange the unit and deceive the contracting office by dropping off used generators or generators that do not match the requirements set forth by the contract.
- F) T-walls: Another absolute necessity for force protection measures.
- G) Tents: Soldier living areas.
- H) Electrical Supplies: Wiring, switches, and HVAC components.
- I) Gravel: An absolute necessity in some areas where mud and dust are omnipresent and a luxury for some other sites.

The contracts listed above take at a minimum two months to get approved, funded, and awarded. Thus, units should initiate these contracts well before engineer work begins and as soon as the command team has authorized construction of the COP in order to ensure all supplies are on hand prior to the arrival of Engineers. Contracts in theater are notoriously difficult due to language barriers, confusion over technical specifications, and the timeliness and responsiveness of local national vendors.

Units should seek to have a very specific statement of work for their contracts in order to avoid any possible confusion by the vendor for what is expected from them. Moreover, during

contracted support, units should ensure that proper security arrangements are made so that contractors are searched prior to entering the new COP and also that they are continuously overseen by U.S. forces. It would also greatly benefit the unit if military engineers are on site to verify that the work is being constructed in a safe manner in order to avoid possible safety concerns later such as improper electrical grounding.

Technological Augmentation

Units should be cognizant of the new technologies that can assist with expanding force protection for their COPs. The Remote Digital Imagery Surveillance System (RDISS) is a system replete with cameras which provide close range coverage of dead spaces and entrance control points to the COP. The RDISS can be monitored inside the Company TOC. Although there is no substitute to having an alert soldier manning a position, the RDISS greatly assists the tenant COP unit in providing additional eyes on of dead spaces near the COP. The RDISS requires very little manpower and maintenance expertise once established, but only works effectively in daylight hours.

As opposed to the RDISS which provides close range visibility, the Mobile Eagle Eye (MEE) provides enhanced long range visibility. The MEE has a standalone generator and a system of cameras that can be raised and lowered depending on the range required for visibility. The MEE provides decent day sight color acuity but has an excellent Forward Looking Infrared (FLIR) camera. The controls are sensitive but infantrymen can master the controls after attending a five day course given by the Field Service Representative.

Raven-B systems provide the COP unit with a mobile intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (ISR) collection platform. These Ravens are currently fielded to the majority of all Infantry companies. The use of these systems, like all aircraft, is dependent on weather, but they are relatively simple to use. Units operating within COPs can quickly monitor and track movement in areas of key interest. However, Ravens are not as unobtrusive as some units would like to believe. In rural areas, the hum of the engine can easily be heard and oftentimes are spotted first by livestock then by local nationals. Moreover, certain communication systems and jamming devices can possibly interfere with the functioning of the Raven.

Unattended Ground Sensors (UGS) can also be used to assist with providing additional sensors around the COP. The implementation of UGS requires much sophistication and units oftentimes decide that the system's requirements are not worth its application. Additionally, UGS can be used not only as a force protection device but also as an ISR asset. The next generation of UGS should focus on reducing the costs of the systems while simplifying interface functions for the combat arms soldier. In the near future it is foreseeable that the use of UGS will greatly increase, and mirror the success which Unmanned Aerial Surveillance (UAS) systems currently enjoy.

The MEE and RDISS provide great additional eyes on of near and far objects but an additional asset which units should consider using for force protection is a force protection dog. Man's best friend provides the wary sentry with the best means of detecting an unforeseen threat. Force protection dogs are authorized for units as long as they receive the necessary shots from a medical detachment (distemper, rabies, heartworm, and if possible, neutered). Force protection

dogs not only serve as excellent sensors but oftentimes prove to be a huge morale boost for Soldiers on the COP. Force protection dogs work best in rural areas where there are less sensory stimuli (e.g. other dogs, traffic, litter, etc...).

Communication

For units operating out of COPs, communication with their parent unit is of extreme importance and in some cases a matter of life and death. Today's military units have multiple communication platforms: FM, SATCOM (Harris PRC-117), Force XXI Battle Command, Brigade and Below (FBCB2), Blue Force Tracker (BFT), Tacticomp, Thuraya satellite phones, local cell phone coverage, Very Small Aperture Terminal (VSAT), and Initial Ku Satellite System (IKSS). Despite this wide array of systems and bandwidth coverage even COPs situated on high ground or in urban areas with a concentration of power grids should plan for reduced comms effectiveness. Units should never forget though that there is no replacing having the communication "high ground," which often, but not always, correlates with the geographical high ground.

Units should also be extremely wary of new Civilian off the Shelf (COTS) comms platforms. For example, Tacticomp, has been fielded to many units in Iraq but with very poor results thus far. Tacticomp is advertised as a windows based system which allows command posts to quickly post electronic data to units operating out in sector. Tacticomp's technology has been brought forward to units in Iraq without the necessary testing which units should do to familiarize themselves with at training centers. Additionally, the system is based on wireless technology which does not exist in Iraq or Afghanistan. Thus, units should be cautious to volunteer themselves for untested new equipment. Instead commanders should focus on educating their Soldiers on comms systems organic to their unit and maximizing the capabilities of this existing equipment.

Final COP Considerations

Commanders should never forget that maximizing US personnel on the ground is the primary rationale for COP establishment. Commanders should not build COPs simply on a whim. There are considerable time, labor, and money costs associated with COP construction. COP construction should be preceded by detailed planning. Every detail should be considered, even how the COP will be named. For example, will the COP be named after the unit, a fallen comrade, or be given an Iraqi name so locals can more easily reference the outpost? These decisions although seemingly minor should not be overlooked. Since the beginning of the surge in Iraq there has been a significant increase of COPs in Iraq. With a potential drawdown of troops after the surge, US forces will have to close down some COPs as there will simply not be enough combat forces on the ground to man these newly developed COPs.

Construction of COPs does not automatically equate to an abatement of insurgent activity. Units should not expect that simply building a COP will cause insurgents to cower and flee. There is no substitute for Soldiers patrolling on the ground, and COPs can sometimes actually lower a unit's overall boots on the ground troop strength. COPs require a significant troop presence to secure and man, which unlike FOBs, cannot be outsourced, for example COP force protection

security, radio watch, field feeding, and manual labor must all be handled by US forces. Economy of force should be considered when deciding whether a unit is better suited operating out of a FOB or detaching companies out to COPs.

In the final analysis, COPs should be built if they allow American forces to better protect the populace, enable greater freedom of movement, secure lines of operation, and enable Soldiers to better interact with the local populace. COPs should not be seen as forbidding moat like fortresses by the local nationals who live in its vicinity. In fact, many COPs have a Civil Military Operations Center for the primary reason of providing a meeting place for the local populace to engage with US forces and to share intelligence or concerns. Commanders should also remember that COPs are transitory locations and that they should avoid being mentally and operationally anchored to a geographic location because of an existing COP.

The Afghanistan and Iraq wars have changed the concept among US forces of what constitutes the “rear” and how our military forces need to be arrayed in the COIN fight. Ten years ago the term Forward Operating Bases and Combat Outposts would have been foreign to any Soldier. Today’s conflict requires units to operate their formations in a decentralized and nonlinear manner. Units need to be prepared to operate in both rural and urban environments. COP development can be a great tool which Commanders can leverage in order to better secure and engage the local populace. COP development is a necessary skill for battalion staffs to master. If the past five years are any indication of the future, then COPs will continue to be constructed as a means to strengthen the US military’s counterinsurgency efforts.

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