Unity of Command

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Operation Anaconda was a multifaceted, large scale, joint military operation executed by American forces and friendly Afghan forces in the Shahi kot Valley of Paktia Province, Afghanistan. American military operation in Afghanistan began in late 2001, in the aftermath of the 9/11 terrorist attacks. Intelligence sources believed Osama bin Laden had taken protection in the Shahi kot Valley. The end state of this operation was to eliminate Taliban stronghold and destroying Al Qaeda fighters. Despite experiencing Unity of Command challenges during Operation Anaconda, ultimately the mission was considered a success.

Unity of command is one of the nine principles of war. Unity of effortcan only be achieved through close, continuous interagency and interdepartmental coordination and cooperation, which are necessary to overcome discord in adequate structures and procedures, in compatible communications, cultural differences, and bureaucratic and personnel limitations (JP1, 2017). Unity of command works simultaneously with unity of effort; unity of effort ensures the success of unity of command.

Due to the complexity of the operation, it was determined Task Force (TF) Dagger could not effectively plan the mission. Two weeks prior to mission execution, Combined Joint Task Force (CJTF) Mountain assumed lead on the operation. According to Fleri et al., operations changed from a geographically dispersed Special Operations Force (SOF) centric force with decentralized planning of most ground operations at the Joint Special Operations Task Force (JSOTF) level, to a geographically concentrated large conventional ground force with operations requiring detailed functional component planning (Fleri et al., 2003). It was evident Commanders were scrambling to correct the planning shortcomings.

Establishing unity of command is essential in order to ensure communication and reduce confusion among forces. For ANACONDA, Combined Joint Task Force (CJTF) Mountain had Tactical Control (TACON) of Joint Special Operations Task Force (JSOTF) DAGGER, K BAR, and TF 64 and Operational Control (OPCON) of TF RAKKASAN (Fleri, E., Howard, E., Hukill, J., and Searle, T., 2003). Some of the command structure apprehensions were reduced once command authority was identified.

Black Special Operations Force (SOF) and interagency operations did not fall under CJTF Mountain. This created conflicts as the priorities of the other agencies did not fully align with the intent of the CJTF commander. Conventional forces were used to having control of SOF in the past (in Afghanistan) and because SOF were sensitive to conventional forces headquarters’ attempts to regain de facto control over them, an environment developed that made unity of effort difficult (Martin, 2009). As a result, during mission execution communication, knowledge sharing, clearly defined authorities, and information management were problematic.

Control and priority of air asset request became a critical communication challenge. Operational Control (OPCON) of some aircraft remained with Joint Special Operations Air Component (JSOAC) not CJTF Mountain. According to Fleri et al., CJTF Mountain, through the Air Control Element (ACE) wanted to prioritize and task these assets as the tactical commander, but the SOF ground forces assumed Air Craft (AC) 130s were SOF only assets (Fleri et al., 2003). CJTF Mountain resolved the air asset conflicts during the mission execution phase of operations.

Operation Anaconda was the largest ground battle during Operation Enduring Freedom (OEF) although initial plans were a Brigade-sized operation. The initial unity of command catastrophes were resolved as forces underwent operation Anaconda in order to be considered a mission success.

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