

# Lessons Learned Vignette



From the  
Medecins Sans Frontieres (MSF)  
(Doctors Without Borders)  
CIVCAS Incident  
Kunduz, Afghanistan  
October 2015



# Agenda

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- **Background**
- **Situational Overview**
- **Mission Perspective**
  - From The C2 Element
  - In The Air
  - On The Ground
- **Discussion Points**
- **Result of the Incident**
- **Considerations**
- **Lessons**

## Background

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- On Oct. 3, 2015, members of US Forces-Afghanistan (USFOR-A) supporting a partnered Afghan force, conducted a combat operation that struck a trauma center in Kunduz operated by Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF), also known as “Doctors without Borders.”

## Situational Overview

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- The city of Kunduz was occupied by the Taliban; government facilities were taken over, government equipment and weapons were seized, Afghan civilians and national defense personnel forced to evacuate south to the airport. A push was made by Afghan forces, with the support of a small US ground force, to retake Kunduz. Close Air Support (CAS), controlled by the US team, assisted as the partnered force retook each government facility, one step at a time.
- On the night of the incident, the target was the National Directorate of Security (NDS) compound in the center of the city. Over the two days prior, and through heavy fighting, the partnered force had re-secured the Police Support Unit (PSU) HQ, the NDS Prison and the Provincial Chief of Police (PCOP)/Provincial Governor's (PGOV) compound.

## **- Call Out -**

### **Law of Armed Conflict (LOAC)**

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#### **Precautions in the Attack (Article 57, Additional Protocol I of the Geneva Conventions)**

**The key principle is that in the conduct of military operations, constant care should be given to spare the civilian population.**

**With respect to attacks, the following precautions should be taken:**

- (1) Do everything feasible to verify the objectives are not civilians, civilian objects, or protected targets.**
- (2) Take all feasible precautions in the means and methods of attack with a view to avoiding and minimizing incidental loss of civilian life or property.**
- (3) Refrain from launching an attack that could cause incidental loss of civilian life.**
- (4) An attack should be canceled if it becomes apparent that the objective is not a military one.**

# **Mission Perspective from The C2 Element**

## **(Prior to the Incident)**

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- **Kunduz was in turmoil, with heavy fighting throughout the city. The Taliban had amassed and taken control.**
- **A small US contingent, partnered with Afghan forces, was attempting to retake the city.**
- **Numerous CAS missions had been executed, supported by several aircraft, and all had been successful at mitigating US and AFG casualties.**
- **The next AC-130 to support the mission was required to take off an hour early. They took off with minimum information (frequency of ground force, call sign, and approximate coordinates). Not unusual because additional information would be passed electronically while en route.**
- **After the AC-130 took off, their Ku-band Satellite System (KuSS) failed, disabling data transfer. The additional mission information normally transferred to the aircraft en route would now have to be transmitted via alternate means.**



# **Mission Perspective in the Air**

## **(Prior to the Incident)**

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- **The AC-130 expedited their takeoff and launched one hour early. They had basic mission information, but could have requested/received more information while they were en route.**
- **They understood that there had been numerous engagements of ground forces throughout the city for several days. They also understood that it is difficult to discern who is shooting at whom. Intel reports indicated that the insurgent force had possession of threats to the aircraft (missiles).**
- **After takeoff, while refueling, the AC-130 experienced failure of their KuSS, hindering data transfer and reach back to mission command, including the ability to transmit full motion video.**
- **Upon arrival over Kunduz, the aircraft is fired upon by an assessed man-portable air defense system (MANPAD). Defensive measures were taken to avoid the threat, putting the aircraft at an angle and distance from the intended target that inhibits the onboard sensors from accurately tracking coordinates provided by the ground force.**

# Mission Perspective on the Ground

(Prior to the Incident)

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- US forces arrived in Kunduz, were just introduced to their partnered Afghan force, and had to convince the recently defeated force to stand and fight to retake Kunduz.
  - Over the next four days, there was heavy fighting, outnumbered by insurgents. The ground force conducted numerous airstrikes in order to move into the city and retake critical positions. Because of the intensity of the fighting, they had very little sleep and were running low on ammunition, batteries, and other provisions.
  - The Afghan force decides to advance on a suspected Taliban command post, with US forces on standby to provide CAS. The US force did not have line-of-sight with the target and were engaged in fighting to defend the PGOV compound. The AC-130 arrived for CAS support, but due to threats to the aircraft, had to take defensive maneuvers, delaying their ability to engage the target.



# Discussion Point 1 - Ground Force

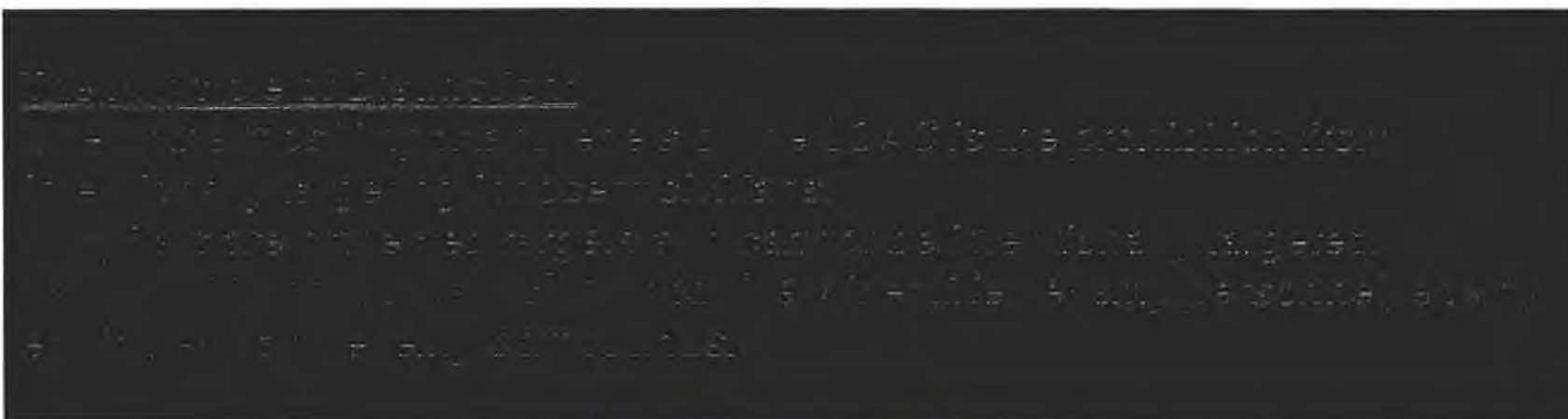
(Prior to the Incident)

- Meetings with Afghan and Resolute Support Mission (RSM) leadership indicated that retaking Kunduz was of the highest priority; the ground force believed that failure was not an option.
- The ground force engaged in fighting for 4 days. The partnered Afghan force lacked the confidence to fight and had to be rallied to continue.
- Ground forces were exhausted and running low on ammunition, batteries, and other supplies.
- Their current location, the PGOV compound, was in the heart of Taliban territory. Their position was increasingly difficult to defend, receiving sporadic heavy fire from every direction.
- The Afghan force decided to continue to maneuver to retake the next government facility.

## Discussion Point 2 - Ground Force

(Leading up to the Incident)

- An Afghan force approached their intended target from the airport, the NDS compound, a suspected Taliban command center.
- The Afghan force was expecting to be outnumbered and possibly outgunned.
- The Afghan force asked for US help with CAS on the target.
- US forces were still at the PGOV compound with no visual contact on the new target, which was approximately 400 meters away, forcing them to rely on and interpret target description information from the Afghan force.



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## Discussion Point 3 – Ground Force

(The Incident)

- The AC-130 CAS aircraft arrived on station.
- The Joint Terminal Attack Controller (JTAC) passed the necessary information to the aircraft, but they had to take a defensive maneuver because of a MANPAD and had trouble locating the target. They asked for a physical description to “walk” them to the target.
- The JTAC’s ROVER (full-motion video receiver) was not operational.
- The JTAC was forced to interpret and relay the description of the target from the Afghan assault force. The CAS aircraft was unaware that the JTAC did not have line-of-sight of the target.



## Discussion Point 4 – CAS Aircraft

(Leading up to the Incident)

- On board the AC-130, failure of the Ku-Band Sat System (KuSS) eliminated MiRC (military chat) and FMV capabilities.
- A MANPAD required evasive action, moving the aircrafts orbit out several miles.
- Onboard sensors slaved the target coordinates to an open field.
- The physical description of the target lacked distinction and could have easily describe numerous structures in Kunduz.
- Aircrew members were confused, information was not clear about the target.
- Over an hour of pattern of life (POL) observation at the target showed several people walking around, but no one appeared to have a weapon.



## Discussion Point 5 – CAS Aircraft

(Leading up to the Incident)

- Attempts to verify the target and intent of the ground force with the JTAC resulted only in an “affirmative” response.
- The aircrew asked for clarification on which buildings to target and the intent for people within the compound. Again, the aircrew was unaware the JTAC did not have line-of-sight of the target.
- JTAC passed the intent to strike a T-shaped building and any squinters (enemy personnel running away).
- Aircrew asked for verification again, and the JTAC responded “affirm.”
- JTAC passed authorization to commence firing.

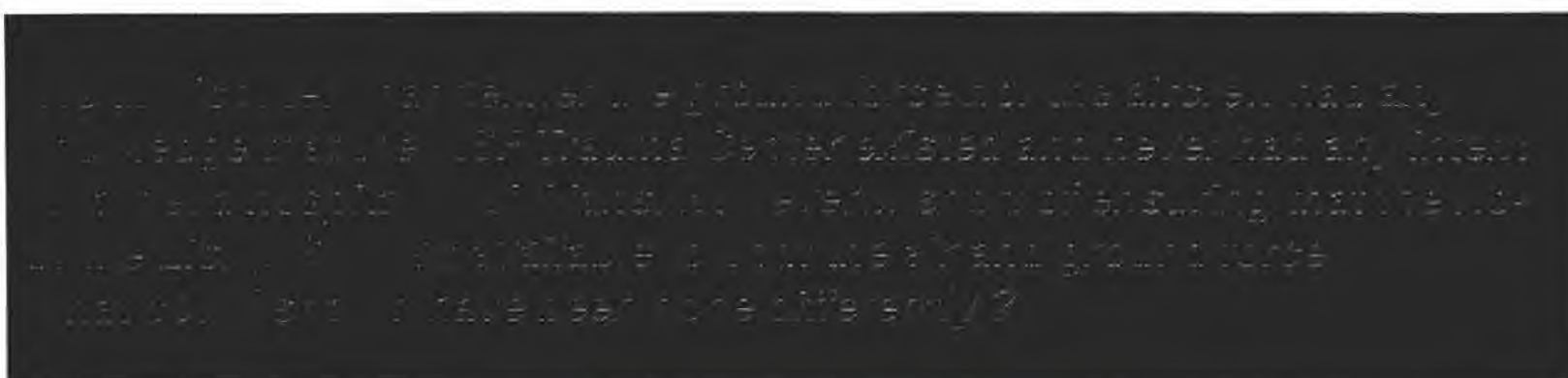




## Discussion Point 6 – CAS Aircraft

### (The Incident)

- The AC-130 commenced firing, first on the T-shaped building, then continued hitting groups of squinters. No reports were received from the ground force while firing on the target.
- The US ground force waited for a battle damage assessment (BDA), with the assumption that the AC-130 was striking the NDS Compound.
- After 20 minutes of the AC-130 firing on the target, the C2 element contacted the US ground force and queries them whether their CAS was striking a trauma center.
- The JTAC radios the AC-130 and called for a cease fire.



## Discussion Point 7 – The C2 Element

- Up until the incident, the C2 element was under that assumption that the mission was proceeding successfully.
- When the call was made over satellite communications that the AC-130 was “going hot.” The C2 element acknowledged.
- 12 minutes later a phone call to the C2 element reported that the Trauma Center in Kunduz was being hit by aerial fire.
- Reports such as this must be verified and confirmed. This process took approximately 20 minutes.



## **Result of the Incident**

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- **The MSF “Doctors Without Borders” main building of the Trauma Center was destroyed.**
- **The USCENTCOM investigation found 30 civilian deaths and 37 injuries.**

## **- Call Out – Intent and Lawful Military Targets**

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- The ground force intended to target an enemy command structure. The ground force, through the JTAC, passed the correct grid coordinates to the aircrew of this structure – is this a lawful military target?
- Who has primary responsibility for positive identification (PID) of a lawful military target? During partnered operations? Aircraft, ground force, C2 element?
- The ground force had no knowledge of an MSF facility in the city of Kunduz. Who has responsibility for ensuring that unlawful targets (i.e. “No Strike List”) is disseminated?
- Does a hostile act or hostile intent define a lawful military target? What if that act or intent is coming from something on the No Strike List? Who is responsible to determine if it’s a lawful target in that moment?

# Considerations

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- While no commander can ever disregard LOAC, what authorities could the ground force reasonably think they had to retake Kunduz after the VTC?
- What was the C2 Element's knowledge of and coordination for airstrikes? What level of responsibility should they have for airstrikes?
- Who has the responsibility to ensure everyone has knowledge of the No Strike List (NSL)?
- Who has responsibility to ensure that structures on the NSL are properly marked? The Trauma Center has no traditionally accepted markings.
- Was the LOAC and Rules of Engagement (ROE) complied with during this strike?



# Lesson 1

## *Complexity of Close Air Support*

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- When employing CAS, additional complexities and extenuating circumstances exponentially increase the overall potential for catastrophic results.
  - A thorough review of this incident reflects the growing complexities of CAS on a technologically advanced battlefield.
  - Combat systems, whether weapons, communications, or mission command systems, rely on people, and human error cannot be completely eliminated.
- Recommendation:
  - The system of checks and balances covering weapons employment needs to be reviewed and shared with partnered forces to improve their understanding when involving CAS.
  - All CAS training and education should focus on ROE as well as vignettes that illustrate a combat situation with contributing factors.
  - Crew Resource Management should be emphasized when utilizing CAS in an urban environment. All available methods should be used to establish PID.

## Lesson 2

### *Technologically Advanced Battlefield Challenges*

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- While technology and equipment failures contributed to this incident, better training and increased situational awareness at every level could have made a difference in the final outcome.
  - Ensuring US personnel have the best tools and systems available is critical to establish situational awareness and Mission Command, especially when CAS is contemplated or employed.
  - Communication system failures combined to hinder situational awareness and prevent critical information from reaching key decisions makers during the incident.
  - Despite the technological advances in sensors and weaponry, the proximity of civilians to combat operations, and locations of partnered forces makes it increasingly difficult to maintain situational control.
- Recommendation:
  - Pre-deployment training should include familiarity with communication and friendly force tracking systems, mission planning tools, and mission approval processes to better simulate the combat environment.

# **Lesson 3**

## ***Operational Dexterity of the Force***

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- **Units must enhance the operational dexterity of our force by fully utilizing live and virtual environments to train combat skills in scenarios that are as realistic as possible.**
  - **Enhancing combat capabilities requires increased focus on integrated training, verification exercises, and pre-deployment spin-ups with theater-specific scenarios.**
  - **Improved sensors and communication systems can, and often are, critical to the success of the force, but when any of these systems fail there must be a firm understanding in basic CAS procedures that do not rely on technology.**
  - **The more individuals that understand the CAS process and employment capabilities, the more capable they are of avoiding catastrophic events.**
- **Recommendation:**
  - **Utilize the Joint Fires Observers Course program of instruction to highlight the complexity and risks of CAS from planning to execution to personnel assigned to operational elements and to our partnered forces.**

# Lesson 4

## *Theater Guidance and Decision Making*

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- **Complex theater tactical guidance makes decision making difficult for ground forces.**
  - While not causal to the Kunduz incident, it served as a reminder that despite training efforts, many deploying units and ground elements believe that the Rules of Engagement and Tactical Guidance should be simplified.
  - Theater commanders must regularly review tactical guidance for currency, relevancy, and clarity. This is especially true when operating with a partnered force.
- **Recommendation:**
  - Revise theater guidance to a BLUF format that focuses the reader/attendee on the priority points of emphasis within the guidance.

**Questions?**