

# The Avghani Model

By Stanley T. Grip Jr.

**I**n December 1961, officials of the Kennedy administration viewed security developments in Southeast Asia with increasing concern. In particular, they saw the communist-led insurgency in South Vietnam as an increasingly dangerous threat to the



stability of that country's pro-Western government. The President shared his advisers' concern but was reluctant to consent to any large-scale American military response. As an alternative, he approved small-scale U.S. military advisory assistance to the South Vietnamese army.

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*Soldiers of the National Guard's 19th Special Forces Group, Operational Detachment Alpha (ODA) 944, frequently shop at the markets in downtown Avghani.*



*Special Forces troops lead a Montagnard commando team near Ba To, Quang Ngai Province, Vietnam. Today's Special Forces fill roles remarkably similar to those of their Vietnam-era counterparts.*

U.S. Army



President Kennedy was particularly enthusiastic in his support of the Army Special Forces (SF) teams who predominantly served in this advisory capacity. Coincident to visiting their Fort Bragg, N.C., headquarters earlier that year, he personally authorized the distinctive green beret that is still worn by Special Forces soldiers today.

Throughout the subsequent Vietnam War years, the Green Berets did significant service. Their actions in Vietnam (and in numerous deployments since the end of the Vietnam War) have made Special Forces the stuff of American legend. Today, the men who wear the green beret are once again essential players in a counterinsurgency crisis. Though their deployment location is different, contemporary SF soldiers are serving in roles that their 1961 counterparts might find remarkably familiar.

In modern SF parlance, that role is known as foreign internal defense (FID). This combat advisory function is one of the five core missions of Special Forces. Units tasked with the FID role are responsible for organizing, training and assisting the defense forces of foreign nations. Foreign internal defense is essentially a long-term mission and is better understood in contrast to one of SF's other core missions: direct action.

Direct action tasks include specific, short-term combat actions, generally inside enemy-held territory (such as blowing up a bridge or attacking an enemy headquarters). While FID-tasked SF soldiers could certainly participate in their advisory unit's combat activity, the fighting role of these Green Berets is secondary to the mission of training and assistance. In a very real sense, the roles and risks of FID activity are much the same today as they were 40 years ago: A 1960s-era SF soldier transplanted from South Vietnam

would likely have little difficulty comprehending the mission of his contemporary Iraq-deployed counterpart and recognizing the independent spirit of today's Special Forces (although the Vietnam-era Green Beret might need a moment to acquaint himself with evolutions of uniform and equipment).

To his Regular Army counterpart, that independent spirit is never more obvious than in the SF soldier's readiness to "go native" whenever circumstances require. Just as in the Montagnard highlands of Vietnam in 1969, contemporary SF soldiers (especially those in FID or similar unconventional warfare roles) share every aspect of the lives of the foreign soldiers with whom they serve, often including appearance. In October 2005, a widely released set of photographs ac-

companying a press report about U.S. counterinsurgency operations in Afghanistan graphically portrayed this inclination. The report led with a stark photo of a pair of sunburnt, bearded SF operators, who looked like a hybrid of Muslim imams, Foreign Legionnaires and Lawrence of Arabia.

Given all the similarities between the Special Forces soldier of 1965 and his contemporary Iraq-deployed counterpart, there is one distinctive difference that the 1965 Green Beret might find particularly surprising: In the 1960s, SF units were virtually all either active duty Army or Army Reserve. Currently, two Special Forces units are actually drawn from the National Guard. If anything, these National Guard Green Berets reflect an even more independent mind-set than their Regular Army peers. They also tend to be marginally older than their active Army counterparts. Like other Guard members, they also bring the bonus experience of their civilian skills to the mission, an advantage that can be critical in the sort of far-flung independent operations that Special Forces undertake. One of these National Guard units, the 19th Special Forces Group (Airborne), is of particular interest because of its recent experience in Iraq. That experience serves as the nexus of issues and outcomes that are of national-level interest.

The interest begins with the 19th Special Forces Group's (SFG) National Guard mission: to support the active Army's Iraq-deployed 5th Special Forces Group (Airborne). Given that support connection, the 19th SFG sends its own Special Forces teams (now referred to as Operational Detachment Alpha or ODA) for eight-month tours in Iraq. In 2006, the 19th Group's ODA 944 returned from such a deployment in Avghani, a large town in northern Iraq. With a population of about 13,000, Avghani serves as the regional administrative hub for 51 other villages in the

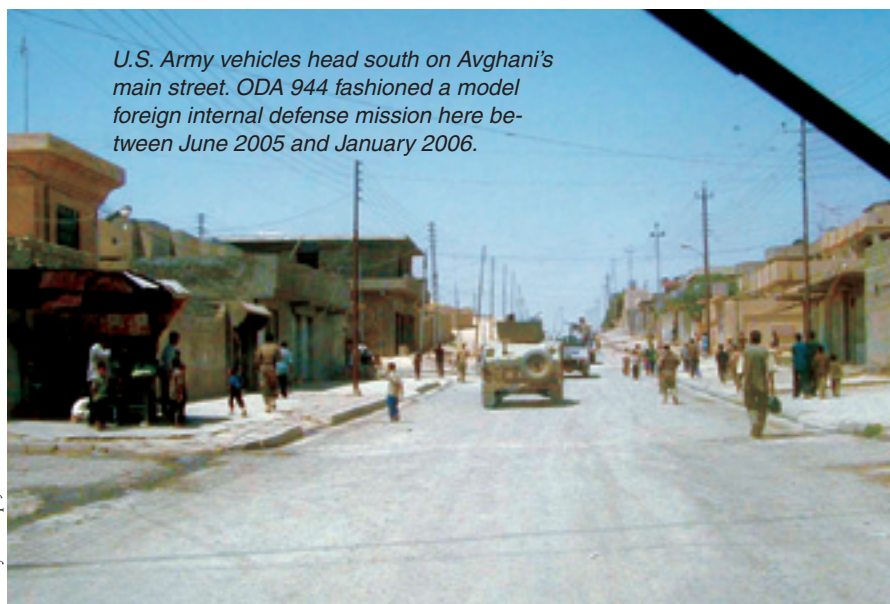
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Only 25 miles from the Syrian border, Avghani was a safe haven for insurgents before the arrival of ODA 944 in June 2005.

area. It is situated about 6 miles north of the nearest city, Tal Afar, about 25 miles from the Syrian border.

**B**efore ODA 944's arrival in June 2005, terrorists of the al Qaeda-affiliated band Taqfir al Jihad destroyed the town's police headquarters. After the attack, there was no viable police department left in the community, and the town government was in shambles. The traditional Sunni-Shiia religious split of larger cities was present in Avghani, and the ethnic complications of the regional Arab-Kurd mix were further complicated by a third distinct ethnic group, the Turkmen.



U.S. Army vehicles head south on Avghani's main street. ODA 944 fashioned a model foreign internal defense mission here between June 2005 and January 2006.

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The overall situation was a matter of particular concern to American commanders in the area because Avghani was seen as a choke point for insurgent travel to and from the Syrian border and as a safe haven for insurgent rest and re-supply. Elements of the American Army's 3rd Armored Cavalry Regiment (ACR) swept the town for terrorist suspects and weapons, but the effect was minimal and transitory. In short, the insurgents succeeded in paralyzing day-to-day activity in Avghani.

Accordingly, when ODA 944 arrived in the Avghani area, the unit received a traditional foreign internal defense mission: Train an Iraqi infantry battalion to reassert control of Avghani and its environs, then bring the battalion to a level of self-sufficient proficiency in regional counterinsurgency operations. From June 2005 to January 2006, the National Guard Green Berets of ODA 944 worked hard to successfully achieve this FID objective. In doing so, they authored a joint Iraqi-American success story that is now cited as a model Iraq FID mission. Along the way, ODA 944 forged a firm link not just with the officers and men of its counterpart Iraqi infantry battalion, but also took the initiative to train and reintegrate the newly formed local Avghani police department. This initiative (undertaken at the request of ODA 944's leaders) helped cement not just the Iraqi-American working relationship, but also the long-term relationship between the Avghani police force and the Iraqi army battalion.

Two Special Forces "Bay Staters" played essential roles in this success. Tom Sarrouf, a Massachusetts state trooper, served as the team's commander. Mike Cutone, another Massachusetts state trooper, served as the team's senior NCO. Both men unhesitatingly credit their 10 fellow team members for ODA 944's success; both men likewise commend the work of the Iraqi infantry with whom they served, and both are unequivocal in their praise of the Iraqi police who risked so much in the defense of Avghani.

Though Capt. Sarrouf's and MSgt. Cutone's high esteem of American subordinates and their Iraqi comrades rings true, the record is clear that both Capt. Sarrouf and MSgt.

Cutone exercised the crucial officer and NCO leadership roles. Maj. Doug Overdeer, commander of the Regular Army SF company to which ODA 944 belonged, described the two men as "a phenomenal leadership team," recalling in particular how they "worked closely with the company to push the envelope and find creative solutions to difficult problems." Their actions in Avghani demonstrated classic SF characteristics of up-front combat leadership, tactical knowledge, local empathy, embassy-level tact and independent flexibility. In conversation, both men reflect with a smile the independent mind-set of Special Forces when they occasionally refer to Regular Army forces as "Mother



*MSgt. Mike Cutone, senior NCO of ODA 944, combines 20 years of Special Forces experience with civilian law-enforcement expertise as a Massachusetts state trooper.*

Army” or “Big Army” and then go on to praise the support they received from heavy units like the 3rd ACR. Both men single out 3rd ACR Lt. Col. Joel Armstrong for the unstinting logistics support he provided during the Avghani operations.

MSgt. Cutone’s easygoing conversation and friendly personality exude a youthful manner that belie 20 years of successful SF experience. Combining that experience with his civilian law-enforcement background, he worked in Avghani to build the confidence and capability of members of his counterpart Iraqi infantry and police. Building from the ground up, MSgt. Cutone and his fellow Green Berets began by teaching basic skills, then putting those skills into practical application with confidence patrols and, ultimately, with combat missions. At every step of the way, he leavened the training with a straightforward personal commitment to the Iraqis: “We’re not going anywhere. We’re going to live here and sleep here. We’re going to fight when you fight, suffer when you suffer.” A devout Catholic, MSgt. Cutone never hesitated to characterize himself as a man of faith to his fellow Iraqi soldiers and policemen and never discouraged those among them who practiced the tenets of their own faith from doing so.

**F**ocusing first on hard-taught, hard-learned, operational basics, Capt. Sarrouf likewise never compromised the importance of personal commitment and face-to-face presence. “We go downtown, we buy vegetables,” Capt. Sarrouf explained. “Every trip downtown we buy from different vendors and spread the wealth. It’s socioeconomic. It helps stimulate their thought process about what we’re there for.” Capt. Sarrouf was instrumental in arranging and leading a meeting with Sheik Salah Al-Taha, leader of the regional Jahaysh tribe. The tribe spanned a large area of the country from southern to northern Iraq near the Syrian border and included both Shiite and Sunni adherents. As a result of the Sheik’s patronage, the Avghani police force grew from 60 men to nearly 250. In addition, the Jahaysh subsequently played an important role in securing the area and denying insurgents freedom of movement through the region.

*Iraqi soldiers discovered an improvised explosive device made of 60 mm mortar rounds and a bottle of jellied gasoline; it was detonated by an ODA 944 sniper then reconstructed for study.*



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Speaking of meetings with Iraqi civilians, Capt. Sarrouf observed, “Guys from Mother Army would have to wear helmets and body armor because it’s the rule, and they have no choice. We go in, we take our boots off, take our body armor off and take our helmets off. If you don’t, then



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*SFC Rick Homestead and an Iraqi soldier examine the crater made when a suicide bomber detonated himself and his vehicle outside the truck that served as a 'mobile gate' to the ODA 944 compound.*

the cultural language you're speaking is, 'We don't feel safe in your home as your guest.' It's disrespectful."

Going above and beyond the call of duty, Capt. Sarrouf and MSgt. Cutone made a habit of "eating whatever they feed you ... You know you're gonna need the Cipro after this one." Risk of dysentery notwithstanding, face-to-face meetings like this helped to establish excellent working relationships in Avghani and its environs, making friends and working allies out of local officials who might otherwise have only been neutral bystanders—or worse.

Ultimately, Capt. Sarrouf, MSgt. Cutone and the Green Berets of ODA 944 achieved what they set out to do. When ODA 944 returned to the United States in January 2006, the Iraqi infantry battalion of Avghani was operational. The battalion successfully conducted operations in conjunction with "heavy" units of the 3rd ACR, integrating fixed and ro-

tary-wing air support. In the course of mutual operations, improvised explosive devices (IEDs) were neutralized, weapons and ammunition caches found, and "blacklist" insurgents identified and captured. The improvement of life in Avghani itself was evident.

ODA 944 also established the essential precedent of integrating Avghani's police company into the counterinsurgency equation. In doing so, ODA 944 created a competent, long-term and fundamentally local response to the counterinsurgent threat. The resulting cooperation between local infantry and police succeeded in stabilizing the town and its environs. Most important, in the integration of local police forces, Capt. Sarrouf and MSgt. Cutone succeeded in defining the insurgency in a new way: not as a military problem, but as a law enforcement problem. Though they readily agree that such a characterization still requires the presence of Iraqi infantry forces, they both hope for the day that police, not the infantry, will solve Avghani's problems.

ODA 944's story is now seen as a benchmark Special Forces FID mission; it is reviewed within the Special Forces and conventional Army communities as the Avghani model. In a real sense, it helped pave the way for subsequent in-country successes in 2007. Similarly, ODA 944's effort established a benchmark Army success in the minds of Americans at home. The Avghani model exemplifies a successful plan that is feasible in the context of any strategy short of immediate withdrawal. Moreover, it represents a viable method that need not be contingent on whether Iraq ultimately remains one nation or three. Finally, it is based on a straightforward and fair proposition: that we should spare no reasonable effort to train Iraqi forces to assume responsibility for both local defense and the maintenance of peaceable order. Given that proposition, the men of ODA 944 have shown us a way forward. It is worthy in equal measure of grateful appreciation and thoughtful consideration.



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***SFC Deiter Kolling probes a trench containing an ammunition cache that security patrols discovered just 400 meters east of ODA 994's compound.***

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