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With Green Beret Tactics, Combating Gang Warfare

By ERICA GOODE APRIL 30, 2012

SPRINGFIELD, Mass. — At first glance, the Brightwood neighborhood in this central New England city would seem to have little in common with war-torn villages in Iraq or Afghanistan.

But when two Massachusetts state troopers, Michael Cutone and Thomas Sarrouf, returned to their jobs here after deployments with a Green Beret unit in Iraq, they noticed troubling parallels.

Like the residents of Avghani, the small northern Iraqi town where the two had helped establish and train a local police force to combat insurgents, many families in Brightwood, a low-income, largely Puerto Rican neighborhood in the North End, lived in fear. Gang members and drug dealers cruised the streets on motor scooters carrying SKS semiautomatic rifles in broad daylight. Gunfire erupted almost daily.

Perhaps the only sentiments that ran higher than the residents' fears were their apathy and distrust of the police, who swooped in to make arrests but did little to involve themselves in the community.

convincing them that it was futile to fight a war without gaining the trust and support of those most affected by it. So in 2009, when gang violence spiked and community leaders and the city police were eager to develop new tactics, the troopers proposed trying the counterinsurgency strategies they had been trained to use in Iraq.

“It was kind of an ‘aha’ moment,” Trooper Cutone said. “Gang members and drug dealers operate very similarly to insurgents. I don’t mean they’re looking to overthrow the state. But the way that they blend into the passive support of the community and use that to their advantage is very similar.”

On a sheet of butcher paper, Trooper Cutone drafted a plan, listing goals like “Work by, with and through the local population,” and “Detect, degrade, disrupt and dismantle criminal activity” — maxims similar to those drilled into him during counterinsurgency training in the Special Forces.

Increasingly, law enforcement officials are concluding that conventional policing techniques are ineffective in achieving lasting change in failing urban neighborhoods where gangs find safe haven, and new approaches are being tried out in a number of cities, though most are not adapted from a military model.

Trooper Cutone said that traditional methods — periodic shows of force, like sting operations and raids that temporarily remove gang leaders from the streets — address only symptoms, but the problem remains. He used the example of a Labrador retriever running sea gulls off a beach; the birds fly off but return once the dog moves on.

“I’m not a military guy,” said Lt. Col. Timothy Alben, a division commander with the State Police, but the logic of the troopers’ argument persuaded him, although he said that the term “counterinsurgency” made him and others a little nervous because the public often mistakenly associates it with kicking in doors and conducting night raids.

“You’re not going to arrest your way out of this problem,” Colonel Alben said.

responsible for, and that goes back to the mission of Special Forces, whether in Iraq or Afghanistan."

The core of the approach is a community meeting, held every Thursday, often at 101 Lowell Street, a brick high-rise that anchors the neighborhood and is a frequent stop for police officers hunting down drug dealers or members of the local youth gangs known as posses.

Led by Trooper Cutone and Deputy Chief John Barbieri of the Springfield Police Department, who immediately embraced the project, the meetings, advertised by word of mouth, have grown steadily in attendance, drawing residents, community leaders, landlords, representatives of city agencies and nonprofit organizations, and local politicians.

Gary Linsky, the owner of a paving company, started attending after Trooper Cutone stopped him for a traffic violation and instead of issuing a ticket, persuaded him to participate. Karen Pohlman, a nurse practitioner at the nearby Baystate Brightwood Health Center, heard someone mention the meetings and decided to attend.

The gatherings are part networking session, part pep rally and part social event. At a recent meeting, Trooper Cutone, standing ramrod straight at the front of the room in his blue uniform and black lace-up boots, reminded the group of its mission to "promote a safe and secure environment" and "reduce gang activity and violence."

"You are the greatest resource," he said.

The police reported on recent episodes: tire slashings, a group of youths throwing rocks at cars, a shooting. Applause broke out to welcome a city parks department worker attending for the first time. Summer jobs were discussed, as were home foreclosures, graffiti removal and the need for landlords to take responsibility for their buildings.

New ideas offered at the meetings are quickly translated into action: a "walking

entrance of 101 Lowell displaying the names and faces of people barred from trespassing on the property was the brainchild of a resident fed up with the drug trade operating there.

Jose Claudio, a community leader at the New North Citizens Council, assembled a handpicked team of "street leaders," residents who act as an informal intelligence network, reporting suspicious activities to the authorities and keeping alert for weapons and for drug dealing and other criminal acts.

The police, in turn, have reached out to the neighborhood. Troopers, city police officers and community leaders go door to door, enlisting residents' support and informing them about social services and programs like Text-a-Tip, which allows them to provide information anonymously by texting it from cellphones.

The program has attracted attention in other cities, like Salinas, Calif., that also have small budgets and big gang problems. The Naval Postgraduate School in Monterey, Calif., has provided the Massachusetts state troopers with a computer program, known as Lighthouse, that analyzes geographical and social relationships. Troopers feed data about gang members and other criminal suspects into digital devices and Lighthouse allows them to more effectively target suspects.

The team working on the project now includes a lieutenant, Michael Domnarski, also a veteran, and six troopers. Last year, its target area was expanded to about 30 blocks from 8.

While there has been a growing debate over the effectiveness of counterinsurgency techniques in the military, particularly in Afghanistan, many involved in the Brightwood effort say that their sense is that the neighborhood has benefited from the approach. Its success has not yet been validated with hard numbers, but a Harvard engineering class, taught by yet another veteran, Prof. Kevin Kit Parker, is evaluating its impact on arrest rates, calls to the police, ambulances summoned for gunshot wounds, the amount of graffiti on buildings — an indicator of gang activity — and litter on the streets, among other things.

most residents surveyed by the students said they thought the program had improved things.

Not everyone is enthusiastic, however. Wilfredo DeJesus, 35, who was standing outside 101 Lowell with some friends during a recent meeting, said that he did not think the project would help people and that he objected to the photo display of people barred from the premises. “People think they’re child molesters or something,” Mr. DeJesus said, adding that some of the people pictured “didn’t do bad things.”

Professor’s Parker’s class also found that arrests in the neighborhood and calls for service to the police went up from 2010 to 2011.

“We think more calls is good,” he said. “This suggests that there was a tremendous amount of unreported crime before this program started.”

In fact, before the program started, residents almost never reported criminal activity, calling the police only after someone was shot, Trooper Cutone said. But recently, a tip from someone in the neighborhood led to the discovery of a gun in a trash bin. And a few weeks ago, troopers pursuing a man who fled during a traffic stop were guided by a flurry of calls to the State Police barracks, the callers describing what the suspect was wearing and where he had last been seen.

“You can tangibly feel a difference,” said State Representative Cheryl A. Coakley-Rivera, who grew up in the North End. “The neighborhood wants this initiative. We had never actually sat down with law enforcement before and committed to improving the quality of life for an entire neighborhood.”

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