

# STRANDED OFF-ROAD

**Situation:** I was deep into my fourth rotational deployment to Afghanistan with the 96th Civil Affairs (CA) Company. We had been working in the same general area of operations (AO) for about 2-1/2 years, so we knew the people and the terrain well. Moreover, we had established a fairly dependable routine of accessing the resources we needed to support our missions while immersed among the people. Our battalion was a reserve outfit stationed in Wisconsin, and 90% of the team were veterans to this mission and the AO. As the team leader, this was my first Afghanistan rotation with this team. I had recently transitioned from active duty and I now reported to the Reserve Component in Wisconsin.

About half way through our four-month-long deployment, my team's mission shifted to a remote sector of the company's AO that had not been visited regularly. This sector was very rural and comprised of loosely networked villages nested into the foothills of the northwestern mountain range along the Pakistan border south of the city of Khost. Our team's mission was to assess whether these villages were providing safe haven and support to the Taliban or if they were simply being left alone. We soon discovered that accessing the area was restricted to smaller commercial off-road vehicles due to their lighter weight and narrow wheelbases. In short order we pursued leasing non-tactical vehicles (NTV), including motorcycles that were appropriate for the terrain and permitted us to gain access to these villages. The vehicles were light-duty four-wheel drive wagons that proved unwieldy to navigate the narrow roads that snaked around tight turns and washed out creek beds that were completely untrafficable by our organic HMMWVs. After about three weeks working in this remote sector our team was beginning to get frustrated by the excessive time lost on mission because of the increased transit time needed to address vehicle maintenance back at FOB TILLMAN. We were consuming a lot of time and fuel traveling between our support networks adjacent to the FOB. Because the terrain was so harsh, maintaining these vehicles became a daily chore. We often needed to return to the FOB to address minor unscheduled repairs. Doing so required pulling the entire team out of sector for both convoy security and force protection considerations as we headed back to FOB TILLMAN to replace punctured tires, change fluids, refuel, and make minor repairs. This severely impinged on our progress in the villages. Moreover, we were spending more money in fuel expenses due to the unscheduled addition of regular round trips exceeding 130 kilometers.

During our next pit stop at the FOB, I addressed the dilemma with the company commander over lunch at the dining facility, who was pressing to get the team's mission done prior to our transition of authority. He agreed that the current arrangement was not working and it needed to be addressed. We broke from the discussion after lunch and he asked me to come see him at the company HQ prior to heading back out. About an hour later I knocked on his door and he invited me to sit down. He stated that he had thought on it and succinctly recommended that we use our OPFUNDS (operational funds) to finance the vehicle maintenance locally to avoid breaking the team from mission longer than necessary. Internally, I was hoping that he would be amicable to resolving this, as we were in dire need of a better solution, but once the idea hit my ears, I felt uneasy about the position it would place my team in. Use of OPFUNDS was highly restricted. It was well publicized that misuse of OPFUNDS would quickly result in criminal charges and risk one's career. Our OPFUNDS were issued strictly for contracting local security assistance, providing for our safe house, and leasing our NTVs. Ironically we were prohibited from using the funds for fuel or vehicle maintenance, as those services and resources were already contracted for coalition maintenance at FOB TILLMAN. My commander sensed my apprehension but insisted that, regardless of what policy says, this was the best way to accomplish the mission. He emphatically stated that there was no need for anyone else to know. Should the OPFUNDS be used to ensure team success and possibly increase force protection? After all, we are here to help the people of Afghanistan and these are precisely the situations that agile and bold leaders must be prepared to address.

## REFLECTION...

As a CA Soldier my comfort zone is distant from that of a typical American Soldier. The nature of our work is dependent on leaders that are creative and do not hesitate to do what has to be done. We are trained to embrace the bigger picture while working amongst native populations and cultures distinctly different from our own and we do so willingly because we know that someone has to do it. I wholly believe that we were making a difference. I am convinced over these last several years that we are called to make decisions in the void – the remote areas and challenges of conflicts poorly addressed by policy and regulation. Ultimately I directed that my team use the OPFUNDS to continue our mission. I believe that it was necessary in order to accomplish our unique mission that simply was not supported well by the FOB infrastructure. The fact that we had special OPFUNDS at all was proof of the exceptional nature of our mission. I made it clear to my team that this was my decision and if someone questioned it, to direct them to me. We did not have a guilty conscience in doing our job, especially in consideration that there were no discernible consequences for doing so. The bottom line was that someone was paying to repair and refuel our vehicles, and we were saving time, investment, and expenses by obtaining these critical services locally. We were also improving the bonds with the population that we were working amongst.

Ethical Dilemma at the Time of the Incident: I had many responsibilities as a CA team leader, and the Army would certainly hold me accountable for them, including the expectation that my decisions remain lawful. Neither my team nor the company commander himself would likely dispute this inherent responsibility. CA teams are known for their resourcefulness, lack of support networks, and operational agility under remote and austere conditions. My commander's rationalization was based on the principle of common sense and his position relied on sound logic. It's no doubt that his confidence in the team and me was relieving. I felt that his argument was certainly sensible, hardly unreasonable, but I was uncomfortable with the position that it would place the team in if somehow they had to answer for why they were violating the policy. Truthfully I thought, "who else would know, and how?" We were operating so remotely that in all probability I was making a mountain out of a molehill. I expected the team would be ecstatic and would be relieved to be able to finish our job – to help the people of Afghanistan.

Laws/Rules That Apply: Policies and regulations dictating restrictions of use of OPFUNDS are punishable under the Uniform Code of Military Justice (UCMJ) Article 92, Failure to Obey Order or Regulation. A conviction could end an officer's career.

Consideration of Other COAs and 2nd and 3rd Order Effects: I could have strictly followed the rules as regulations prescribed, but I choose not to in the knowledge that I felt I was better serving our cause in Afghanistan by accomplishing our mission. I was comfortable knowing that my decision preserved resources, reduced expenses, and enabled the team to continue its work. Frankly, I was not able to determine any meaningful consequences to my decision. Perhaps, I risked setting a poor example to my team by breaking the rules. I know that my team did not see it that way. Most of us felt that individuals generally disconnected from the reality of our particular mission were making such arbitrary policies. They better applied to typical organizations that did not have the unique mission that we were charged to carry out in remote sectors. I believe that what I chose to do was neither wasteful nor insubordinate, and is why unit leaders should have more autonomy to make decisions that enable missions to be completed within reasonable, ethical boundaries.