

Improving Joint Doctrine for Security in Theater: Lessons from the Bastion-Leatherneck-Shorabak Attack

By **Nicholas J. Petren** | April 01, 2017

[DOWNLOAD PDF](#)

Major Nicholas J. Petren, USAF, is a student at the U.S. Army Command and General Staff College.

In September 2012, Taliban insurgents conducted one of the most significant attacks against an airfield from which U.S. forces were operating since the Vietnam War. On September 14, 15 insurgents exploited a weakness in the perimeter of the sprawling Bastion-Leatherneck-Shorabak (BLS) complex to gain access and attack coalition equipment and personnel. Over the next 6 hours, responding U.S. and British personnel captured 1 attacker and killed the other 14. However, the insurgents were able to destroy six Marine Corps AV-8B Harriers and severely damage two others. In addition, an Air Force C-130 Hercules, a C-12, three MV-22 Ospreys, and a British Sea King helicopter were damaged, while several aircraft shelters, hangars, fuel bladders, and other equipment in the area were damaged or destroyed. In all, the attack caused over \$200 million in damage,¹ but the most tragic losses were two U.S. Marines, killed during the firefight that also injured 17 U.S. and British personnel.²



AV-8B Harrier aircraft pilot with Marine Attack Squadron 211, Marine Aircraft Group 13, 3rd Marine Aircraft Wing (Forward), relocates Harrier to Camp Bastion, Helmand Province, to increase overall readiness level after September 14, 2012 attack (DOD/Keonaona Paulo)

The causal factors permitting this attack to happen included a convoluted force protection task organization, lack of unit integration, and failure to identify a single tactical-level commander with the responsibility for base defense, all of which contributed to and were exacerbated by failures in risk management.³ Complex operating environment or not, this tragic incident was avoidable. If the defending security forces were better organized and not decremented to the point that they were not reasonably capable of effectively maintaining a secure perimeter or dominating the terrain immediately around the base, the insurgents would have been much less likely to have gained access to the aircraft parking area.

Clearly, this incident required the assessment of responsibility. The U.S. commanders responsible for the defense of the BLS complex, Marine Corps Major Generals Charles Gurganus and Gregg Sturdevant, were censured and asked to retire following the completion of the U.S. Central Command (USCENTCOM) investigation. Furthermore, as the British House of Commons Defence Committee's report concluded:

*Insufficient attention was given to the fundamental requirement of defending Camp Bastion from external assault. We believe that this was complacent. Given that the attack took place in the British sector of the camp, British commanders must bear a degree of responsibility for these systemic failures.*⁴

It is evident that the risk management decisions of the British commander of Camp Bastion were found to be lacking.

Beyond individual accountability, an examination of the doctrinal and operational context is necessary in order to address shortcomings and decrease the possibility of similar incidents during future operations. Specifically, joint doctrine addressing security in theater must stress the importance of planning to secure strategic airfields and logistical hubs.

Background

By September 2012, the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) was in the midst of the drawdown from the Afghanistan surge and was under pressure to begin turnover of responsibility for security to the Afghan forces. The overall number of ISAF soldiers in Afghanistan was steadily drawing down from a high of more than 130,000; on September 10, the number stood at 112,579, with 74,400 of those from the United States.⁵ The BLS complex (now called Camp Shorabak by the Afghan government) in Helmand Province was home to more than 20,000 coalition personnel. Major General Gurganus was commander of ISAF's Regional Command–Southwest (RC[SW]), headquartered on BLS. RC(SW) encompassed a 99,700-square-kilometer area made up of Nimruz Province and the troubled Helmand Province, with a host nation population of approximately 1.1 million.⁶ RC(SW) was supported by the 3rd Marine Aircraft Wing (Forward), commanded by Major General Sturdevant, headquartered and primarily operating from BLS. In March 2012, RC(SW) included 17,800 U.S. Marines. By September 2012, there were 7,400.⁷ This force drawdown necessitated operational and tactical force allocation and mission curtailment decisions. These decisions were risk management calculations, accounting for force protection. Major General Gurganus's higher commander, U.S. Army Lieutenant General James Terry, stated that "there was a constant balance between projecting forces and protecting the force during this period with priority to protecting the force."⁸

In terms of tactical elements organized to defend BLS, the base was a complex of camps grouped primarily in three areas. Camp Bastion, including the airfield, was operated and defended largely by British forces. Camp Leatherneck was the Marine Corps area, and Camp Shorabak was the Afghan National Army area. The entire complex was contained within a 37-kilometer-long perimeter. The security force (SECFOR) available included a broad array of coalition forces and contractors that were not operating as one team. The interactions between these units were regulated by a

memorandum of understanding, under which the Camp Bastion and Camp Leatherneck SECFOR operated independently with separate standard operating procedures and did not effectively coordinate perimeter surveillance or patrol activity on and off base.



Marine with Mobile Assault Platoon 4, Weapons Company, 1st Battalion, 25th Marine Regiment patrols southern Washir District, Helmand Province, October 2, 2011

Camp Bastion was defended by a 134-person unit from the Royal Air Force (RAF) regiment, assisted by an augmenting force drawn from other assigned units along with a small force of the Tongan Defense Services. The RAF provided headquarters, a quick reaction force (QRF), and patrols, while the Tongans and the augmentation force personnel manned the perimeter towers. Of the 24 towers on Camp Bastion, only 11 were routinely manned due to a lack of available personnel, a risk accepted by the RAF Camp Bastion commander.⁹

The Camp Leatherneck defense comprised 255 contractors, a 288-person force from the Jordanian military, a 105-member element from the Bahraini armed forces, and a 110-member team from 2^d Battalion, 10th U.S. Marine Regiment (2/10), a field artillery unit.¹⁰ The contractors and non-U.S. military personnel manned entry control points, perimeter towers, and provided internal QRF for

Camp Leatherneck, while the Marines performed a myriad of security-related tasks. Camp Shorabak (formerly Camp Bastion) is an Afghan ministry of defense airbase located northwest of the city of Lashkar Gah, in Helmand Province, and the 2/10 commander had primary responsibility for off-base patrolling in the approximately 1,000-square-kilometer area of operation (AO) surrounding BLS.¹¹ The task force responsibilities included “providing [field artillery] support for Task Force (TF) Leatherneck, operating the Combined Joint Operations Center (CJOC), manning [entry control points] on Camp Leatherneck, manning a QRF, manning Patrol Base Boldak, and manning the Tactical Recovery of Aircraft and Personnel (TRAP) mission.”¹² Due to their varied responsibilities, the 110 members of 2/10 could only generate one squad per 24-hour period to patrol off base. The RAF regiment element was able to generate one to three squad-sized patrols as well, but their activity was not consistent or effectively integrated with U.S. security forces. Although the CJOC existed in order to coordinate force protection activity and performed in that task during the attack, coordination was primarily reactive, as structured in the memorandum of understanding. If the combined manpower available for force protection had operated as a single, effective unit, the BLS perimeter would likely have been more secure.

In June 2012, a Joint Staff Integrated Vulnerability Assessment (JSIVA) team visited Camp Leatherneck and Bastion airfield. The team concluded that the airfield’s security was inferior to that at Bagram Airfield and identified six vulnerabilities. Further, the team “assessed the two routine patrols assigned to the airfield as largely ineffective from a preventative/detection perspective, primarily because of the size of the airfield and ramps, the aircraft dispersion, the lighting, the lack of detection and warning systems in place,” and “not being able to control access (vehicle and pedestrian) to the airfield.”¹³

During June and July 2012, Camp Bastion perimeter breaches were discovered after the fact but were accepted by the 3rd Marine Air Wing and RAF Camp Bastion commanders as criminal “scrapping” rather than evidence of insurgent probing of perimeter defenses in preparation for an attack.¹⁴ The July breach was performed by individuals who penetrated the same area of Camp Bastion targeted in the September 2012 attack and then exited the base through their breach point undetected. Surveillance video of another breach revealed reconnaissance of an empty guard tower.¹⁵

The Attack

The Taliban attackers were provided with intelligence on their targeted area of the Camp Bastion airfield. They were transported to just outside the camp, where they donned U.S. Army uniforms. At approximately 2000 hours, they made their way toward the Camp Bastion perimeter using a ravine to mask their approach. They were armed with AK-47s, rocket-propelled grenades (RPGs), and fragmentation grenades, and some of the attackers were huffing paint. On that night, there was 2 percent illumination, and per Camp Bastion standard operation procedures, only every other perimeter

tower was manned.¹⁶ The insurgents breached the perimeter fence with wire cutters 150 meters from unmanned tower 16 and entered the base undetected to begin their attack at approximately 2200. They split into three groups of five, targeting Harriers, helicopters, and personnel, respectively. After the insurgents started shooting, it took 16 minutes for the first elements of the Camp Bastion QRF to make contact with the enemy. Over the next few hours, the insurgents caused the damage described earlier before 14 of them were neutralized by RAF, Marine Corps, and Air Force personnel on the ground with supporting fire from attack helicopters, while the fifteenth was captured wounded. Post-attack analysis showed the attackers used Soviet-era F1 grenades to destroy the Harriers, meaning they were close enough to accurately roll, throw, or place them under the aircraft.¹⁷ This is significant because it illustrates the failure of the combined elements of the Camp Bastion SECFOR or organic units to detect the approach of the Taliban, their breach of the perimeter, or their free movement around the Harriers on the flight line until the attack was under way. Furthermore, the initial contact with the enemy and disruption of the Taliban attack was conducted by maintenance/support personnel and pilots of the 3rd Marine Air Wing rather than base SECFOR. During the attack, integration of highly effective fire from Marine aviation was as much the result of ad hoc coordination by Marines and Airmen who rose to the occasion as it was a controlled integration of fires in the BLS CJOC.

As the USCENTCOM report states, “Only heroic action by U.S. and UK forces on the scene prevented greater loss of life and equipment.”¹⁸ Of note, Lieutenant Colonel Christopher Raible, the Harrier squadron commander, was killed while valiantly leading the charge to defend his aircraft and fellow Marines along with Sergeant Bradley Atwell. The Air Force pararescue team that voluntarily ran into the firefight and played an important role in defeating the attackers by coordinating with attack helicopters and participating in clearing operations with the RAF QRF is another example of the day’s heroic actions.

Improving Joint Doctrine

Doctrine is relevant to the tactical-level decisions of base defense because it guides how leaders in the joint force think about and prepare for expeditionary base defense. The 2014 version of Joint Publication (JP) 3-10, *Joint Security Operations in Theater*, incorporated numerous constructive updates based on lessons learned in Operation *Iraqi Freedom* (OIF) and Operation *Enduring Freedom* (OEF). However, given the likelihood of similarly complex joint interagency intergovernmental multinational operations in the future, there is still room for significant improvement.

First, large, joint-use airfields, often collocated with equally critical ground force–operated sustainment hubs, are often the primary platforms from which the force projects military power across joint operational areas or theaters, and their protection must be a priority. This must be formally acknowledged and planned for in initial phases of joint operations planning. Defending these types of bases or base clusters is critical across the spectrum of conflict. Surely, they will appear on a near peer

enemy's high value target list equivalent, just as they will continue to be targeted by insurgent or terrorist forces. JP 3-10 states that when facing Level I and II threats (including terrorists or enemy special operations forces), commanders should organize security forces "drawing from the units available."¹⁹ This is appropriate for small command observation posts or forward operating bases in lower threat environments, but for large air bases or sustainment hubs, it exacerbates the tension between projecting power and force protection. JP 3-10 should direct commanders to incorporate all available units into base security plans but not to draw from them as the primary source of SECFOR. Units tasked as SECFOR must be specifically identified, trained, and deployed for that mission. This will provide commanders in theater the flexibility to shift focus without taking imprudent risk.

Second, doctrine must stress the need for a single commander at the appropriate level with the authority and responsibility over not only the base or base cluster, but also the surrounding tactically relevant AO. JP 3-10 currently includes "Air Base Defense Considerations"²⁰ and the "establishment of base and base cluster command relationships,"²¹ directing "it is critically important that the JFC [joint force commander], normally through the JSC [joint security coordinator], delegate the authority to conduct JSO [joint security operations] within the base boundary²² to a single commander."²³ These are valuable improvements to the document, but some thorny issues remain unresolved. For example, the challenge of incorporating coalition forces is addressed only superficially. It is understood that U.S. joint doctrine only applies to U.S. forces. However, joint doctrine should clearly direct commanders to ensure a single commander retains tactical control of all coalition forces incorporated into a base cluster SECFOR. The United States should be more insistent on this when it comes to national caveats or coalition command and control arrangements. Rather than dismissing this assertion as politically naive, challenge others to justify why irresponsibly vague command structures are acceptable. In the case of BLS, the USCENTCOM report stated that "the BLS Complex also lacked a single commander with unity of command. . . . Unity of command would have provided the single commander with common oversight and enforcement of standards for all units responsible for protection of the BLS Complex."²⁴ If current or future leaders see a fragmented SECFOR chain of command or lack of organization similar to that which existed at BLS prior to the 2012 attack, red flags should immediately go up, and corrective action must be taken promptly.

Lastly, the joint force must overcome cultural resistance to expanding the base boundary of critical air bases in theater based on threat, vulnerability, and terrain analysis. Currently, the concept of expanding the base boundary is included in JP 3-10 as something commanders should "consider." Rather, it should be the preferred procedure, while retaining the flexibility to adjust due to local conditions. A base commander with base defense as a key component of the mission will have the focus and ability to drive intelligence-based operations to reduce indirect, direct, small unmanned aerial systems, and improvised explosive device (IED) attacks affecting the area. For proof, one needs

to look no further than the success of Task Force 1041 at Joint Base Balad during OIF or Task Force 455 at Bagram Air Base during OEF.

In late 2004, Balad Air Base was under frequent indirect fire attack and located in one of the region's most violent areas.²⁵ Balad Air Base had an effective perimeter defense, but the base commander had no authority outside of it. After successful negotiations with higher and adjacent commanders, the base commander was granted the authority to temporarily expand the base boundary. Task Force 1041 consisted of a reinforced company-sized element whose mission was to operate off base in a 5-by-10-kilometer area between the base perimeter and the Tigris River, where the majority of indirect fire and IED attacks affecting base operations originated. After focused intelligence preparation, Operation *Desert Safe Side* commenced on January 1, 2005. Over the next 60 days Task Force 1041 captured 17 high-value individuals, 98 other insurgents, and 8 major weapons caches. Indirect fire attacks on the base and other attacks inside TF 1041's AO were reduced to nearly zero.²⁶

In part, due to this demonstrated success, when Joint Base Balad was later reorganized in 2008 under the command of the 332nd Expeditionary Air Wing, the 332nd Expeditionary Security Forces Group (ESFG) stood up. Its commander was an O-6 leading a nearly 1,000-person coalition SECFOR team focused on the mission of defending Joint Base Balad.²⁷ This combination of unity of command, authority, responsibility, and clear task organization set conditions for effective base defense. While the ESFG achieved notable results, inconsistent willingness to more permanently expand the base boundary around Balad remained problematic.

Bagram Air Base was mentioned in the 2012 Leatherneck JSIVA report as an example of superior perimeter security. In May 2010, the Taliban conducted an attack on Bagram Air Base that was more determined than the September 2012 attack on BLS. Between 20 and 30 Taliban insurgents assaulted the base around 0300 hours.²⁸ They were armed with AK-47s, RPGs, and hand grenades, and were supported by coordinated indirect fire. The attackers were wearing U.S. military uniforms, and some were wearing suicide vests. They attempted to breach the perimeter in two separate locations simultaneously.²⁹ In contrast to the BLS incident, the attackers were detected outside the perimeter and were defeated before they could penetrate the base defenses. Sixteen of the attackers were killed in the firefight.³⁰ The attack failed to inflict any major damage to the base, although nine friendly personnel were injured. A critical factor that contributed to a better outcome than the BLS attack was clear responsibility and authority for base defense. The 455th Air Expeditionary Wing commander was the base commander responsible for base defense, and the SECFOR was led by the 455th Expeditionary Security Forces Squadron (ESFS) commander. The ESFS was responsible for the perimeter defense, internal QRF, and screening of personnel and vehicles entering base. The 455th ESFS also operated the joint defense operations center, which effectively coordinated support from Air Force aircraft, Army aviation, and Army ground units operating outside the perimeter during the

attack. In order to build upon this success and better defend the largest coalition military operating location in Afghanistan, in November 2012 Task Force 455 stood up. The initial 1,200-member 455th Expeditionary Security Forces Group evolved into a 2,200-person Expeditionary Base Defense Group (EBDG) and Combined Joint Task Force with the addition of a U.S. Army field artillery battalion, a Jordanian infantry battalion, and a Czech Republic force protection company. Tasked to defend Bagram and patrol the surrounding AO, the 455 EBDG commander effectively operated as a brigade-level battlespace owner under the tactical control of the 101st Airborne Division (Air Assault)/Regional Command East commanding general within a 570-square-kilometer area.”³¹

This evolution of command structures and responsibilities evolved at Joint Base Balad and Bagram from lessons learned, and they should serve as positive examples of large base defense in theater. This is not to say that each should be replicated exactly in the future, but the basic model of unity of base defense responsibility, authority, command, and effort is critical to success and applicable to joint or coalition forces. The Air Force uses the term *base security zone* to describe the area outside of the base perimeter fence/obstacle line from which enemy forces could attack the base or affect air operations using standoff threats. This concept is not unique to the Air Force as it is equally important to all large joint use bases supporting joint operations. The base security zone should be identified during a terrain and threat analysis and be used to modify the base boundary as described in JP 3-10 to enable effective base defense operations driven by a single commander at the appropriate tactical level.



Security during Relief in Place ceremony at Base Defense Operations Center, Camp Leatherneck, Afghanistan, to commemorate Transition of Authority from 1st Battalion, 23rd Marines to 1st Battalion, 25th Marines, September 13, 2011 (Royal Air Force/Mitch Moore)

Conclusion

U.S. forces took courageous action during attacks on Bagram, Joint Base Balad, and BLS. In 2010 at Bagram, a complex attack was defeated without significant impact on coalition operations, and Balad was never penetrated by a significant insurgent force. Both stand in stark contrast to BLS, where the appearance of a secure perimeter did not withstand scrutiny. The key differences at BLS were the fragmented base defense chain of command, incoherent responsibility for security below the two-star RC(SW) level, and lack of SECFOR integration. These factors, combined with optimistic risk management decisions by key leaders, left the base vulnerable to enemy attack.

In future operations, enemies will continue to target critical coalition air and logistics hubs in theater in order to disrupt our ability to project power and sustain operations. During major combat operations, these threats will likely include unconventional means such as enemy special operations forces or proxy insurgent/terrorist groups, in addition to conventional attack. Future attackers may be much better trained and prepared than those at BLS in 2012. Therefore, effective integrated base

defense planning and execution in theater are critical across the spectrum of conflict and must not be dismissed as an exercise in preparing for the last war.

We can do better to set up future commanders for success by improving JP 3-10 to increase the likelihood of sound risk management and coherent, tactically effective base defenses around our power projection platforms in theater. Our responsibility to current and future Soldiers, Marines, Sailors, and Airmen demands no less. **JFQ**

Notes

¹ Alissa J. Rubin, “Audacious Raid on NATO Base Shows Taliban’s Reach,” *New York Times*, September 16, 2002, available at <www.nytimes.com/2012/09/17/world/asia/green-on-blue-attacks-in-afghanistan-continue.html>.

² “Army Regulation (AR) 15-6 Investigation of the 14–15 September 2012 Attack on the Camp Bastion, Leatherneck, and Shorabak (BLS) Complex, Helmand Province, Afghanistan,” August 19, 2013, 2.

³ *Ibid.*, 23–31.

⁴ House of Commons, Defence Committee, “Afghanistan—Camp Bastion Attack,” April 16, 2014, 15.

⁵ “ISAF: Key Facts and Figures,” September 10, 2012, available at <www.nato.int/isaf/placemats_archive/2012-09-10-ISAF-Placemat.pdf>.

⁶ Institute for the Study of War, “Regional Command South,” 2009, available at <www.understandingwar.org/region/regional-command-south-0>.

⁷ Jim Michaels, “Two Generals Asked to Retire in Wake of Bastion Attack,” *USA Today*, September 30, 2013, available at <www.usatoday.com/story/news/world/2013/09/30/bastion-marines-afghanistan-gurganus/2897953/>.

⁸ AR 15-6, 7.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 8.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 9.

¹¹ Katherine Keleher, “Task Force Belleau Wood Marines, Partners Celebrate Corps’ 236th Birthday,” November 12, 2011, available at

www.iimef.marines.mil/News/NewsArticle/tabid/472/Article/528985/task-force-belleau-wood-marines-partners-celebrate-corps-236th-birthday.aspx.

¹² AR 15-6, 10.

¹³ Ibid., 17.

¹⁴ House of Commons, 12.

¹⁵ AR 15-6, 18.

¹⁶ Ibid., 22.

¹⁷ Ibid., 6.

¹⁸ Ibid., 2.

¹⁹ Joint Publication (JP) 3-10, *Joint Security Operations in Theater* (Washington, DC: The Joint Staff, November 13, 2014), xiv–xv.

²⁰ Ibid., IV-17.

²¹ Ibid., II-11.

²² JP 1-02, *Department of Defense Dictionary of Military and Associated Terms* (Washington, DC: The Joint Staff, November 8, 2010, as amended through February 15, 2016). The DOD dictionary defines the *base boundary* as “a line that delineates the surface area of a base for the purpose of facilitating coordination and deconfliction of operations between adjacent units, formations, or areas.”

²³ JP 3-10, II-12.

²⁴ AR 15-6, 26.

²⁵ Air Force Manual 31-201, *Security Forces History*, vol. 1 (Washington, DC: Department of the Air Force, June 1, 2015), 16–17.

²⁶ Ibid., 17.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Amir Shah et al., “Taliban Attack Key U.S. Base in Afghanistan, Killing 1 U.S. Contractor, Wounding 9 Troops,” Associated Press, May 18, 2010, available at www.foxnews.com/world/2010/05/18/insurgents-launch-complex-attack-bagram-air-field.html.

²⁹ Joint Training Counter IED Operations Integration Center, Sims Directorate Video, “Airfield Complex Attack, Bagram Airfield Afghanistan,” December 5, 2011.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Christopher J. Willis, “Bagram Security Forces Group Stands-Up,” Defense Video Imagery Distribution System, January 1, 2013, available at <www.dvidshub.net/news/104996/bagram-security-forces-group-stands-up>.