



(S) Putting a New Tactical Comms System to Good Use in Afghanistan

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(S//SI) The CENTER ICE secure communications system allows US and European tactical SIGINT elements to exchange info.

(S) "Our guys are in a TIC." That message, announcing a "troops in contact" incident, arrived early on a January morning at the CSG* Bagram. It was no surprise; the forces involved were moving into a suspected Taliban stronghold, and it was almost inevitable there would be some resistance. Usually, we would see heavy VHF traffic if an attack was impending, but the tactical SIGINTers weren't hearing anything. Suddenly, however, heavy gunfire erupted from all around, and more ACMs (anti-coalition militants) were on the way from a nearby location. The CSG rapidly put together the SIGINT picture, showing where the ACMs were coming from and where they were heading. We were able to notify the troops on the ground and help them gain control over the situation, and to extricate themselves with no injuries.

[REDACTED]

(U) Remnants of the days when the Soviets lived at Bagram

(S//SI) This is, unfortunately, business as usual in a war zone, but with this TIC there was a slight twist. The forces receiving this support were not US soldiers or Marines, but rather Norwegian Naval Special Forces (NORNAVSOF), operating in the Helmand Province in southern Afghanistan. **The report of the TIC arrived, not over our tactical operations network, but via CENTER ICE, a secure communications system allowing tactical SIGINT elements from SIGINT Seniors/Europe partners to talk to each other in theater.** The data provided by the CSG and the GEOCELL went back over CENTER ICE to the Norwegian Intelligence Service Team (NIST*) in near-real-time, allowing them to continually update their troops on the ground as they reacted to a highly volatile situation.

[REDACTED]

(S//SI) Norwegian Intel Service Team flanking CW2 Bill Polidoro, the CJTF-76 Tactical SIGINT Chief

(U//FOUO) Six weeks prior to this January morning, I had arrived in Bagram as the first US CENTER ICE operator. The system was brand new, and while everyone agreed it was a great idea, there were still lots of questions about how to use it operationally. My job was to take the system out and see what we and the partners could make of it. Our marching orders were pretty broad, because we didn't want to limit our options.

(S) The first few weeks (and many subsequent weeks, in fact) were consumed with technical challenges, as I worked with the stellar CENTER ICE support team -- the communications pros at ETC and the systems administrators back at NSA, to turn a prototype system into an operational one. I also set out to "sell" the system and the concept -- showing and talking up CENTER ICE to anyone who came within hailing distance of my desk. The CJTF-76* personnel, from the Southern European Task Force (SETAF) were already working with some of the partners, and were intrigued with the idea of virtual connections with the coalition partners.

(S//SI) The only CENTER ICE partner forward-deployed at the time I arrived was Norway, and their compound was close by. The NIST consisted of only five officers, plus two deployed tactical SIGINTers, and they had almost no collection capability with them. Consequently, they were heavily dependent on the US to provide them with intelligence, and they had established close

working relationships with all the INTs in the Combined Joint Intelligence Service Element (CJISE). They were a gregarious, friendly bunch, famous for their Saturday night barbecues, to which they generously invited the CJISE personnel (and I was a frequent attendee, taking my "foreign relations" role quite seriously, particularly when it also offered me the opportunity for a great steak and a beer).

[REDACTED]

(U) *Current housing for Joint Operations Center personnel*

(S//SI) My interaction with my NIST counterpart was somewhat limited for the first few weeks, as we were still working out some of the technical, policy, and dissemination issues. But I arrived at the CJISE one morning to find an email from him: "Our guys think they are being shadowed. Our collectors are getting a lot of activity on 156.56 MHz -- at least 10 different callsigns. Are you seeing anything?" The Norwegians had seen quite a bit of ACM activity -- and chatter -- during their operations. But **for the first time they were able to reach out to the US Cryptologic System in near-real-time and to get support and some answers back.**

(S) As it turned out, the NORNAVSOF **was** being shadowed, and they were ambushed later in the day. But the tip-off they had given us allowed us to alert the tactical and airborne platforms to their situation and to provide the frequencies, callsigns, and other information the NIST sent us throughout the day to US collectors for monitoring. The ambush ended with bombs dropped on some ACMs and all Norwegian personnel unharmed.

[REDACTED]

(S) *Future home of "NSA Village"*

(S//SI) That was the beginning. By the time the January ambush occurred, we had used CENTER ICE to exchange pre-operational planning information, locational information, and situational awareness data. As their second major operation kicked off on New Year's Eve, we had established a pattern of providing force protection support to the NORNAVSOF as they moved about Helmand Province and warning data about known targets in their AOR*. Several weeks later, they finished their deployment to Afghanistan with their forces intact and with great progress made in identifying Taliban strongholds and disrupting ACM activity.

[REDACTED]

(U) *Entrance to combined Joint Special Operations Task Force compound, named for cryptologic linguist Gene Vance*

*(U) Notes:

CSG = Cryptologic Services Group

NIST should not be confused with the U.S. "National Intelligence Support Teams"

CJTF = Combined Joint Task Force

AOR = Area of Responsibility

(U//FOUO) This is an abbreviated version of an article in the [June Foreign Affairs Digest](#).

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