

DEPARTMENT OF DEFENSE BLOGGERS ROUNDTABLE WITH ARMY COLONEL CHADWICK W. CLARK, DIRECTOR, COIN TRAINING CENTER-AFGHANISTAN, NATO TRAINING MISSION-AFGHANISTAN (NTM-A), COMBINED SECURITY TRANSITION COMMAND-AFGHANISTAN (CSTC-A); AND MARINE COLONEL SHEILA SCANLON, ADVISER AT MINISTRY OF INTERIOR, VIA TELECONFERENCE FROM AFGHANISTAN SUBJECT: FEMALE ENGAGEMENT TEAMS (FETs) TIME: 10:01 A.M. EST DATE: TUESDAY, DECEMBER 7, 2010

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PETTY OFFICER WILLIAM SELBY (Office of the Secretary of Defense for Public Affairs): And we are all set.

Sir, Colonel Clark, can you hear us good, sir?

COL. CLARK: Yes, I can hear you very well. Thank you.

PETTY OFFICER SELBY: Roger that, sir. And we'll go ahead and get started then.

Hello. I'd like to welcome you all to the Department of Defense's Bloggers Roundtable for Tuesday, December 7, 2010. My name is Petty Officer William Selby with the Office of the Secretary of Defense Public Affairs, and I will be moderating our call today.

A note to the bloggers on the line. Please do remember to clearly state your name and blog or organization in advance of your question; respect our guest's time, keeping questions succinct and to the point; and if you are not asking a question, please remember to place your phone on mute.

Today our guest is U.S. Army Colonel Chadwick W. Clark, director of the COIN Training Center-Afghanistan, NATO Training Mission-Afghanistan, Combined Security Transition Command-Afghanistan. Colonel Clark will discuss Female Engagement Teams and how they have been used in the past by the U.S. Marine Corps and other commands in Afghanistan to access information from the silent 50 percent of the Afghan population -- i.e., the women of Afghanistan.

Sir, with that, if you have an opening statement, you can go ahead with that now.

COL. CLARK: Sure. Thank you very much. I appreciate you inviting me on the show.

With that, I'd like to read a quote to you. "The decisive terrain is the human terrain. The people are the center of gravity. Only by providing them security and earning their trust and confidence can the Afghan government and ISAF prevail." That's a quote from General Petraeus when he was speaking to a counterinsurgency class at Camp Julien in Kabul on the 1st of August, 2010.

I'm going to talk about -- a little bit about the FETs and what they do, right off the bat. They conduct engagements of Afghan females, which has been recognized as an important endeavor in building trust and enduring relationships with the Afghan people. This assists GIROA in protecting and gaining support of the Afghan population.

The training that Female Engagement Teams, or FETs, are provided, they give the people on these teams the needed skills to conduct female engagements in a culturally respectful manner, to support the battle space and its priorities, including, but not limited to, a comprehensive understanding of the operational environment, civil-military operations, medical capabilities visits, and educational programs.

I also have with me Colonel -- Marine Colonel Sheila Scanlon, who is an adviser at the Ministry of Interior but also has been working with some of the gender issues and some of the Female Engagement Team things that they've been working on. So both of us will assist in answering some of the questions that the bloggers may have. And as kind of a last-minute thing, I invited Sheila because she's a subject-matter expert on gender issues and Female Engagement Teams. Now, what do Female Engagement Teams do? They support the battle space owner's requirements, they conduct engagements with Afghan females, they do it in a culturally sensitive manner, and they leverage the accepted influence of females in Afghan society.

And with that, I'm happy to start taking any questions.

PETTY OFFICER SELBY: Thank you very much, sir.

And Andrew Lubin was the first one on the line, so you can go ahead and ask your question, Andrew.

Q: Colonels, again, thank you for taking the time today.

I spent some time with the FETs when I was embedded back in June. Can you talk to us, please, about the problems coming out of Washington, where people are complaining that the women are in combat, that's not allowed, et cetera, et cetera?

How are you dancing around this issue?

COL. SCANLON: Well -- this is Colonel Scanlon. We're not dancing around the issue at all. The women are in support of different

groups that are down there. They're not engaged in combat. And with all of us, there is no, let's say, combat zone about here. Every time we leave our camp, we're in the combat zone, and even in our camp we're in the combat zone. So the women are in a support role down there supporting the infantry, but that doesn't mean that they're out there on the line in an offensive nature.

Q: Okay. So then what we're seeing in the papers then is just people trying to make an issue of something that's not there then?

COL. SCANLON: I think any time any woman is near where there are bullets going off, somebody's going to make an issue about it because it goes back to the fundamental issue: do we want our women in combat?

Q: Okay, great. Thank you very much.

PETTY OFFICER SELBY: And Chuck Simmins, you are next on the line.

Q: Yes, thank you. Chuck Simmins from America's North Shore Journal. Is assignment to an FET a full-time assignment, or is this kind of a pick-up task in -- among the other duties that a female soldier might have? And can you give us some idea of how many trained FET personnel we have?

COL. CLARK: Okay. I'm going to tag team with Colonel Scanlon on this one. First of all, it's a -- being on a FET is a volunteer thing. And so all the females that are on these engagement teams have volunteered to do it. They're taken from different specialties, and they go through varying degrees of training, depending on how they're going to be employed. For example, the Marines that are employed in Helmand area go through four months of training that includes combat skills or survivability skills to help them move, shoot and communicate. They go through classes on Pashtu culture and language, engagement techniques and phrases, observation techniques, atmospheric collection, tactical questioning, personnel searches and planning engagements.

There are other FETs that are being used to partner with other Afghan National Army and police females in hospitals in Bagram. So they go through a seven-day course that's taught by the civil affairs and human-terrain team up in Bagram.

There are -- right now, there's a total of 40 female engagement teams. Those teams, it's a minimum of two females per team. So there's at least 80 trained females in the country right now, but 40 teams employed in each one of the regional commands. There's 17 in Regional Command Southwest, five in the South, 11 in the East, six in the North and one in the West.

Sheila, you got anything to --

COL. SCANLON: The full-time duties while they're here -- they come from all different military occupational specialties. The object is they do have to be able to move, shoot and communicate while they're out

there, so there is some physical abilities that they have to have to do the job. And then when they're through doing the female engagement teams over here and they go back to the states, they go back to the units, they go back to the jobs that they were holding before they came here.

Q: Thank you.

COL. CLARK: Thanks.

PETTY OFFICER SELBY: And Gail Harris.

Q: Yeah, Gail Harris with the Foreign Policy Association. I was wondering if you could give us a sense of what the day-to-day operations are of these teams as they engage with the Afghan women and what's the biggest challenges and biggest surprises that they encounter.

COL. CLARK: It depends on where they're employed, really. Some of the teams, like I stated previously, are partnered up with other Afghan national security force females. They're working in, I know, two hospitals in Bagram. But really it depends on how they're being used. They can be used from anything from gathering atmospheric or information at the tactical level, to partnering with Afghan females at the operational level. So it really depends on how they're being used day to day.

Sheila, do you have --

COL. SCANLON: I don't know -- I can't say -- speak for them on what their biggest challenges are, but, I mean, for all of us, the biggest challenge is being away from home and being over here. I think sometimes frustration on what you can help folks and where you can't help just because you're -- you have no control.

So I've got to think there's some of that for them also on what they are able to make happen at the lower levels than where we're at. We're at a much more strategic level. And just it -- whether or not they're able to help is going to make their day.

COL. CLARK: I'll also -- I would like to add that I haven't talked to one woman that's on a Female Engagement Team that isn't very motivated and happy about what they're doing. So there's just a high degree -- high level of morale on the female engagement teams.

Q: Right. I wasn't questioning morale. I was thinking, kind of, of my own experience right after the first Gulf War. I was jogging off-base -- ill advised -- in shorts and tee-shirt. As I got about a half-mile toward the end, a car full of Arab women, you know, covered from head to toe, started following me. And I thought, "Uh- oh, I'm in big trouble." And when I got done -- I was jogging with three men -- when I got done, the women stopped the car and got out and applauded me. And it -- (laughs, laughter) -- apparently, just seeing a woman, you know, they thought: Hey, you know, you're all right.

And so that was what I was kind of wondering, was the reaction of the Afghan women working with the Female Engagement Teams; did it somehow empower some of the women that they encountered or, you know, did some of the women question them and, you know, "Why aren't you home with a husband and kids?", that type of thing.

COL. SCANLON: I will tell you, Gail, that I've never had anybody say that to me since I've been over here. In fact, I've had people thank me for leaving my husband and children back in the States and being over here. Everybody has been gracious.

I make it a point, when I see a woman -- I work over at the Ministry of Interior -- when I see a woman over there, to say good morning to her in Dari, and show respect. And they always look at me, and I smile. I'm thrilled to see them and they're thrilled to see me. So I've got to think it's the same thing out in the fields for the Female Engagement Teams.

They're -- even the men are -- we've had no issues with that whatsoever, other than them appreciative of us leaving our families to come here, whether we're male or female.

COL. CLARK: The -- some of the -- Q: Thank you. That was my experience, as well.

COL. CLARK: I'm sorry, go ahead. I didn't want -- I didn't mean to interrupt you.

Q: No, I -- no, I just -- you know, I just said that was my experience in the Middle East, as well.

COL. CLARK: The only thing that I wanted to add is we've looked at a lot of the AARs that are coming in from the battlespace centers, the commanders. While they may not see the value in the Female Engagement Teams right off the bat, after they're employed, they definitely want to use them and realize the benefit of having one of these teams with them.

The other thing is that all of the Female Engagement Teams that are employed undergo cultural sensitivity training so that they -- if they're being employed in a village, or outside of the wire, if they're attached to somebody that's doing a patrol, then they're -- we're trying to do everything that is in line culturally with what's going on here in Afghanistan.

So unfortunately, they're not jogging in shorts and tee-shirts outside of the camp.

Q: (Laughs.) I only did that once.

COL. SCANLON: And we want -- we'd like to thank -- Gail, we'd like to thank you for your service, because, you know, you served and you've done your time, and we appreciate that, you know, just because we're comrades in arms.

COL. CLARK: Thank you.

Q: Thank you very much.

PETTY OFFICER SELBY: And on to John Doyle.

Q: Good afternoon, or good evening, Colonel. I wanted to focus a little more on the training for the FETs, especially the ones that go out in the field. How long a -- is there a standardized training for them yet, and how long does that take?

COL. CLARK: Well, right now, there is no standardized training for the FETS. The FETS receive training based on how they're going to be employed. The Marine Female Engagement Teams that are being employed in Helmand in Regional Command Southwest go through four months of training prior to their employment. The Female Engagement Teams that are being employed in other places go through training that's commensurate with how they're going to be employed.

I know that's not a good answer, but really the training varies from anywhere from four months to a week's worth of training. Q: Are any other -- any of the other services doing FETs yet besides the Marines?

COL. CLARK: The Marines are; the Army is. And I cannot speak positively about --

COL. SCANLON: I think the Navy is also with the --

COL. CLARK: Okay.

COL. SCANLON: The Navy is also, with corpsmen. That's, I think, all the Navy's doing right now.

COL. CLARK: Yeah, but what we're taking a look --

Q: And what --

COL. CLARK: Yeah, what we're taking a look at is standardizing some of the training for all the Female Engagement Teams that are going to be employed in here.

So probably sometime around the end of January is -- we'll have a program of instruction put together for all the Female Engagement Teams that are going to be employed, and it's going to be focused more on understanding the operational environment and understanding their role in a Female Engagement Team.

I would like to also state that the U.S. isn't the only country that has Female Engagement Teams. The -- Jordan has two Female Engagement Teams; Norway, one; Sweden, one, and that's it. And they're employed in regions east and north.

Q: And of those --

COL. CLARK: Thank you.

Q: And of those 40 teams, can you give me a breakdown of which -- which are which services, if you know that -- how many are Marines, how many --

COL. CLARK: Yeah. Just a second. We -- the data that I have, it doesn't break it down to that level.

Q: And did -- was it an original Marine idea, or did it come from someplace else?

COL. CLARK: I'm sorry, I don't -- I don't know the answer to that question.

Q: How about you, Colonel?

COL. SCANLON: The Marines, I believe -- I believe the Marines started it because they had a need. But since then, the commander of ISAF, General Petraeus, has put orders out on it and directing Female Engagement Teams. So a lot of -- some things just evolve because you have a need for some sort of capability, and then it becomes -- like Colonel Clark says, becomes standardized.

Q: Thank you.

PETTY OFFICER SELBY: And Andrew, are you still on the line with us?

Q: Absolutely. PETTY OFFICER SELBY: Okay.

Q: Colonels, can you talk about the interpreters? With the FETs being successful, you obviously need women interpreters. Are you getting enough?

(Pause.)

PETTY OFFICER SELBY: Colonel Clark, you still there, sir?

COL. CLARK: I am still here.

PETTY OFFICER SELBY: All right.

COL. CLARK: We're just having a private discussion.

PETTY OFFICER SELBY: Roger that.

COL. CLARK: (Inaudible) -- make sure we get our -- (inaudible) -- straight.

We do use -- when the Female Engagement Teams are being employed, they are using female interpreters. The -- obviously they're

not as easy to come by as the -- their male interpreter counterparts, so we're obviously always looking for good female interpreters.

Q: Then are the women going out with men interpreters? Is that what you're indirectly saying?

COL. CLARK: If we are doing a woman-on-woman engagement, then they will want a female interpreter with them.

Q: Okay.

COL. CLARK: There are things that women will discuss among themselves that they won't discuss when there's a man in the room, and I think that's cross-cultural.

COL. SCANLON: We try to do the same thing with the corpsmen that go out, but they're -- for the same reason that they're female, so that the -- they can treat the women.

Q: Okay, great. Thank you.

PETTY OFFICER SELBY: And Chuck.

Q: Yes. Just so I'm clear, we're talking about strictly military units in the FETs; we're not talking about the reconstructions teams. That's an entirely separate matter, right?

COL. SCANLON: That's correct. That's right, Chuck. Q: At what level are the FETs assigned? Are they assigned at the battalion level, the company level? Are they a shared asset? How does that work?

COL. CLARK: It varies depending on how they're being employed and what region they're being employed in. I think down in southwest and in Helmand, they're being attached to -- at the battalion and brigade level. Some of the other places they are held at the task force level.

Q: So then you -- a unit leader would have to put in a request for a -- for an FET to be assigned as part of his plan for operations?

COL. SCANLON: Chuck, it would depend on what the mission is to whether or not they would have to request it. It depends on where they are, where they're going. It's done at the operational level to decide where they need to be engaged.

Q: Okay, thank you.

COL. SCANLON: Does that answer your question?

Q: Yeah, thanks.

COL. SCANLON: You're welcome.

PETTY OFFICER SELBY: (Coughs.) Sorry. And Gail, back around to you.

Q: As you train the new members and prospective members of the -- of the Female Engagement Teams, what are the most important points that you make in your training?

PETTY OFFICER SELBY: Can you elaborate on your question a little bit, please, Gail?

Q: Yeah, I'm thinking more in terms of lessons learned, you know, like when you tell them it's important to respect the culture and that means they have to have their hair covered, only enter a home if invited, you know, some of the key -- you know, so the -- you don't want to jeopardize the mission by, you know, making a cultural mistake, for instance.

COL. SCANLON: Gail, we all try to do that. Whether you're a Female Engagement Team person or whether you're up at our level working, all of us try not to insult the Afghans and to try to abide by their rules.

I'll tell you personally, I'm -- when I'm in -- (inaudible) -- I keep my cover on. I don't -- and when I meet -- and sometimes just going into the buildings, I'll just keep it on, because that just seems to be the way. Why not join them? There's no harm in doing it. So we try not to insult them in any way, shape or form and abide by their culture and customs. So they get the same training as all us -- all of us do; a little bit different training because of where they're going. But we -- yes, we do abide by the customs if we can.

Q: Right, yeah. Yeah, I wasn't implying that you weren't. I just noted that not only in that part of the world but in other parts of the world, it's important -- like, you know, when you're eating, in a lot of parts of the world, don't eat with your left hand. You know, it's bathroomy. You know, there are so many little cultural things that you could inadvertently -- you know, with no intent to offend, but just because you're not aware of some of those little subtle things. It's been my experience --

COL. SCANLON: Absolutely, Gail.

Q: Yeah.

PETTY OFFICER SELBY: Okay. And --

COL. CLARK: And --

PETTY OFFICER SELBY: Oh, sorry.

COL. CLARK: -- also, if I could talk about -- as Colonel Scanlon mentioned, a lot of that training is trans-gender. So we -- everybody goes through that same training. Now, if a Female Engagement Team is going into a village to do a female engagement, a way that they gain entrance into the village so that they're able to do that is they have a male counterpart that talks with the village mullah to get

approval for them to talk to the females in the village. So there's a protocol that we try to go through to make sure that we are engaging Afghans in a way that is within their culture.

Q: Thank you.

PETTY OFFICER SELBY: Bringing it back around to you, John.

Q: Yes, I was wondering, you mentioned that these people come from all disciplines and specialties. Are -- what kind of specialties are you especially looking for in these folks? And also, I'm curious, are you -- are you actively seeking women who are either married or have children of their own so they can relate a little better to women in the same situation? Or is that not an issue? Thank you.

COL. SCANLON: John, it's the same as joining the military. We're an all-volunteer force. We don't discriminate. So they wanted to volunteer for the job. They come in all shapes and sizes -- married, divorced, single, single parents. We take anybody as they are, as long as they can do the job.

COL. CLARK: I think if you're going to be an adviser or be on the engagement team, you got to have a couple of things. You got to have some -- good social intelligence, so that you're able to read people and understand what the meaning is, that you have empathy, so when somebody's talking to you, that you can -- you can understand their feelings. And so as we're -- as they go through the training programs, they're making sure that the people that are volunteering for the Female Engagement Teams have these characteristics.

Q: And what -- and what kind of specialties are you looking for? What military skills or language skills or community -- besides the person-on-person thing, but just, you know, logistics or intelligence or communications or whatever, medical -- what kinds of specialties?

COL. CLARK: I think we need all that. I think -- I think we need all that. The main thing is that they volunteer, that they have -- that they have social skills, that they have empathy, as we've already -- as I've already mentioned. But they need assistance in logistics, they need -- we need medical experts, just with medical training and providing medical care.

We've got to make sure that -- especially if they're going to be employed in the field, that they're physically fit and capable of doing all of the things that are required when somebody goes on a patrol.

So -- you rattled off a bunch of disciplines. We're not looking for any particular ones. As a matter of fact, the more we get, then, it's a greater range of capabilities that we have.

And 40 teams right now -- the demand far outweighs the supply that we have, which is one of the reasons why we're trying to look at the program, expand it, standardize some of the stuff, to take care of the women that are volunteering for this program, so that when they do go

back to their units, that we can make sure that their skills are being used and they're rewarded for the stuff that they've done.

Sheila, do you have anything to add?

COL. SCANLON: I think -- I think you got that all.

Anything else, John?

Q: Is there a fixed time of their service in these FETs? How does that work?

COL. SCANLON: I believe -- it's down south. They're on a seven-month tour. They do all the training. They come over. I believe they stay on the FET the whole time that they're there.

I'm speaking for the Marines.

Q: Okay. Any different in the Army?

COL. CLARK: The Army tours are one year. And so if they volunteer for a FET, they'll probably be part of the FET, the Female Engagement Team, for a year.

Q: Thank you very much.

COL. CLARK: You're welcome.

PETTY OFFICER SELBY: And Andrew?

Q: Yes. When you have the FETs out there in the field, do you keep them in one area so that you may have a FET team, for example, outside of Patrol Base -- (inaudible) -- in Marja or on the other side of Marja, so they can build relationships? Or are they bouncing around from area to area?

COL. CLARK: The Female Engagement Teams that are attached in the south are attached to the battlespace owners. Establishing rapport and maintaining rapport and those relationships is important, just as you pointed out. So ideally we wouldn't want an engagement team that only does a one-time engagement and, you know, serendipitously goes around the battlefield. That does not happen. So they're going to be employed in the battlespace. They'll maintain the -- their presence in that battlespace, so that they build up a relationship over time, just as you pointed out.

Q: Okay. Thank you.

COL. CLARK: You're welcome.

PETTY OFFICER SELBY: And Chuck.

Q: Yes. Has -- this may be above your pay grade, but has any consideration been given to creating an MOS for the Female Engagement Teams?

COL. SCANLON: Chuck, in the Marine Corps, no, they have not. I even asked that question to our Marine central commander, who was just out here last week. But we're looking at that capability and using it, but it's not something right now for permanency, especially as we look at the size of all our services. You have to decide where you're going to put your -- put your people where you mainly need them, and that's the most important thing right now.

COL. CLARK: As far as the Army goes, I don't know. It probably -- some time in the future that -- if Female Engagement Teams are going to be employed in other places outside of Afghanistan, we might want to take a look at maybe a skill identifier.

COL. SCANLON: What -- so, Chuck, it's -- basically, as we -- as long as we continue to pull people from specialities who have the capability of doing the job -- in the Marine Corps, every person's a rifleman, even me. And we're all trained at this level, so that you can pull folks together and send them out to do missions, with the proper training.

So I -- (inaudible) -- even in the Marine Corps we would do it as a permanent military occupational specialty.

COL. CLARK: Yeah. And on the Army side, when you have a skill identifier, all it does is it says you have subject matter expertise in the area. So if they need to go and find some subject matter experts, that they are airborne qualified, there's a skill identifier for airborne qualified folks. So it may be the same for Female Engagement Teams. I don't think we're at that point yet, though. Q: Thank you.

PETTY OFFICER SELBY: And --

COL. CLARK: You're welcome.

PETTY OFFICER SELBY: Sorry about that. I think we're just about out of a time, as -- and I'm sorry we couldn't get back round to Gail and John.

Sir, with that, I wanted to thank everybody on the line today for your questions and comments. And Colonel Clark, if you have any other closing comments, you can go ahead with those now.

COL. CLARK: I'm going to cede the floor to my female counterpart, and if I have anything to add, then I will do it at the end.

COL. SCANLON: I'd just like to thank everybody for their interest in this subject. We're working very hard over here on how to best deploy the FETs. We're learning as we go along.

We are using lessons learned. As Colonel Clark said, we're trying to standardize it across the services. It's exciting -- at least, I think it is. But we're glad to have the support from all of you back in the States, and appreciate your concern for us and all your support. So thank you and happy holidays.

COL. CLARK: Yeah. And I thank you as well and appreciate your support.

PETTY OFFICER SELBY: Once again, thank you, everybody who participated today in the roundtable. Today's program will be available online at the Bloggers link on DODlive.mil, where you'll be able to access a story based on today's call along with source documents such as this audio file and a print transcript.

Again, thank you very much to everybody on the line. This concludes today's event. Feel free to disconnect at this time.

END.