

# HRO in tense situations

Eric-Hans Kramer  
Netherlands Defense Academy

Herman de Bruine  
The Hague University



**proHRO**

**First European  
proHRO Conference**

**15<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup> of November, 2011 / The Hague**

# Topic

- Common topic in High Reliability Organizing literature:
  - The importance of well-trained/ well-functioning teams
  - Concepts that refer to this topic: respectful interaction/ heedful interrelating/ collective mind(fulness)
- However, in some organizations teams are of changing composition
- What are the consequences from an HRO perspective?

# In this workshop

- We'll discuss two cases in which:
  - An organization is confronted with “tense situations”
  - Groups “ at the sharp end” of a constantly changing composition
  - Situated in hierarchical organizations
- What mechanisms are used for reliable operating?
- What are the similarities and differences between the cases?

# Strategies to enhance reliability

- Reducing (effects of) volatility
  - Redundancy in people & hardware
  - Give people 'the big picture'
  - Formal rules and procedures
  - Training/ craftsmanship
- Enhancing collective mindfulness
  - Preoccupation with failure
  - Reluctance to simplify
  - Sensitivity to operations
  - Commitment to resilience
  - Deference to expertise



Afghanistan

# Uruzgan

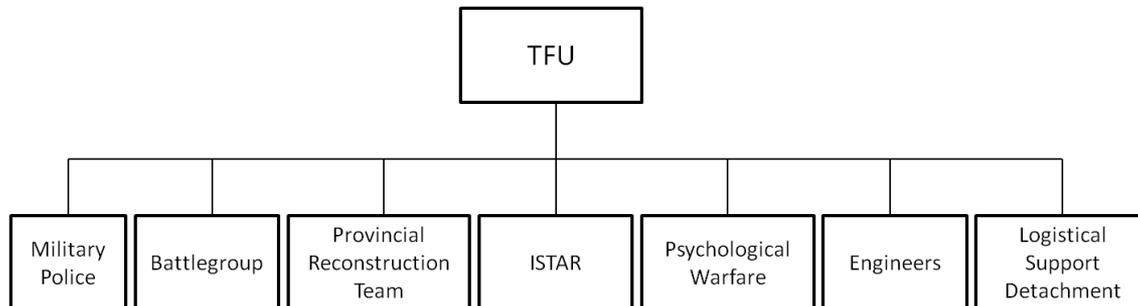


	Hooggebergte
	Laaggebergte
	vlak- en heuvelandschap
	Green / begroeing
	Water
	Plaatsen / steden



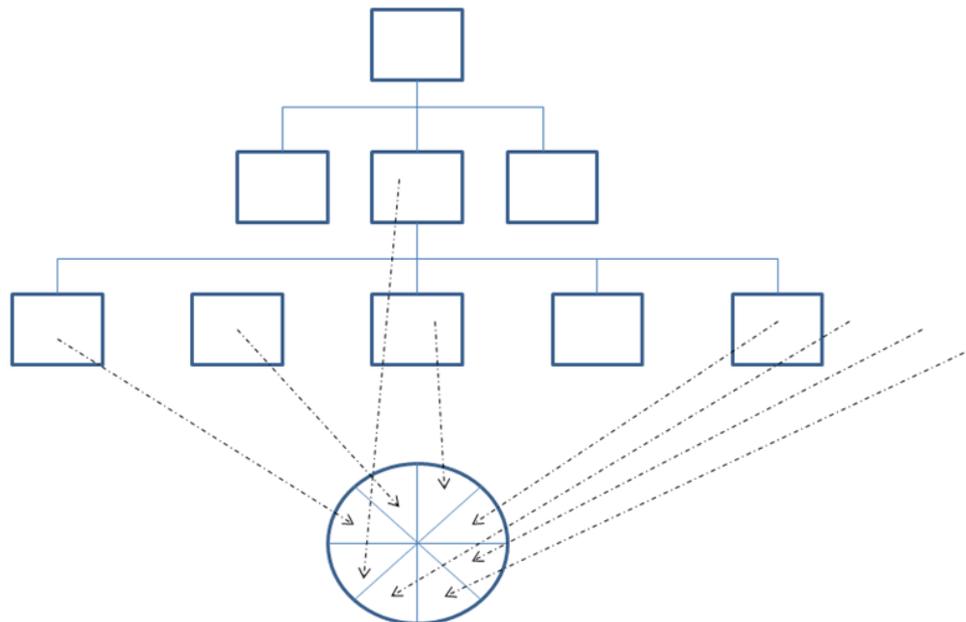
# Context of the Operation

- Task Force Uruzgan was deployed for a “rebuilding mission” in the Afghan province Uruzgan
- Core of the operational concept of the Netherlands Armed Forces was a combination of a PRT and a BG unit
- PRT is Provincial Reconstruction Team
- BG is Battlegroup: unit meant for safety



# Smallest Units of Action in Uruzgan

- **Focus: first six months in Uruzgan**
- SUA is the operational unit at the lowest hierarchical level (35-70 soldiers)
- The SUA-concept:



# The SUA-concept in Uruzgan

- SUA-unit is newly established for each patrol
- For each patrol the unit had to specifically designed
- Therefore a relatively new group had to deal with a dynamically complex environment
- SUA is a “caravan on expedition” that is semi-independent in a complex and volatile environment
- (Compare with: Morgan’s “holographic metaphor”)
- Challenges from an HRO perspective:
  - How to create/ maintain mindfulness, how to stimulate heedful interrelating in constantly changing units?

# How was the case studied?

- Exploratory research into the collaboration between BG and PRT
- 23 open interviews/ qualitative data-analysis
- One main **result** was that BG and PRT worked together in a SUA, together with other specialists

# Composition of the unit varied depending:

- The design of local areas of responsibility
- The goal of the patrol
- The nature of the environment
  - What do you need to be independent?
  - How dangerous is the environment?

But also:

- Intergroup dynamics:
  - Is the contribution of “unit X” something that we consider to sensible/ useful...
  - “Are we going to risk our lives to do this.....??”

# Observations

- Limit the changeability of groups! (reducing volatility)
  - Matching of Areas of Responsibility
- The “context” influenced group processes (enhancing mindfulness)
  - Difference between locations
- Long preparation of a SUA (enhancing mindfulness)
- “Matching personalities”
- Importance of a common frame of understanding
  - The rebuilders were military officers (often of higher rank) that were (individually) deployed for specific (CIMIC) activities

# Observations

- Strategic ambiguity between “rebuilding” and “fighting” was partly resolved by “enactment”
  - In an extremely ambiguous environment, bottom up initiatives can influence “the nature of the mission” to a great deal.
- In later stages, soldiers emphasized they identified more with “the SUA”, than with their original background

# What are the consequences of “group instability” from an HRO perspective?

- Creates a significant challenge which requires constant attention
- Avoiding more volatility than necessary was considered important
- Cohesion “over the borders” of the building block was considered important
- The ability to mix and match groups, while maintaining “mindfulness” is important
  - Small groups become “designers”
  - Structuring becomes a “tool” of High Reliability Management



# Courthouse: case description

(july 2010 – nov 2011)

- Security in a courthouse during opening hours
- Three shifts, variable workload
- Group of 50 policeofficers about 25 officers present a day with a maximum of 8 to 10 auxiliaries a day. (Later due to cuts 3 to 5 a day)
- In the past 5 years this unit was restructured, discipline/ compliance enforced
- Management wants officers to work not only according to the book, take more initiative.

# Action Research

- Workshops (sep - nov 2010)
- (Project) activities (dec – jun 2011)
- External Review (aug 2011)
  
- Evaluation (dec 2011 – feb 2012)

# Workshops (sep – nov 2010)

- Introduction: Concept of high reliability organizing (one hour session)
- Questionnaire (audits Weick and Sutcliffe) to all officers (response > 90%)
- One-day workshop with (three) groups of 15 to 20 officers

# Workshop layout

- Introduction
- Exercise (in subgroups with plenary discussion):
  - small wins in reliable functioning
  - worries about reliable functioning
- Presentation HRO concepts
- Presentation and discussion results questionnaires
- Discussing and voting about improvement points
- Making action plans (in subgroups)

# Resulting action points

(three priorities)

<b>Theme</b>	<b>1<sup>st</sup></b>	<b>2<sup>d</sup></b>	<b>3<sup>d</sup></b>
Risk awareness	16	15	15
Work climate (giving and receiving feedback)	13	13	7
Developing craftsmanship	4	3	17
Enhancing commitment	6	9	3

# Concerns from the workshops

- Characteristics of a 'beginning' group
- Black or white vs shades of grey
- Discussion about the ambiguities in the questionnaire (problem evasion?)

# (Project) Activities (dec – june)

- Formation of 4 workgroups (18 officers involved)
  1. Enhancing risk awareness
  2. Enhancing feedback
  3. Structural attention to the development of employees
  4. Work process

# Small wins & obstacles

- ✓ Plastic -> carton coffee cups
- ✓ Updating and creating a checklist (finishing and starting up the day)
- ✓ Creating waiting cell
- ✓ Awareness activities
- ✓ In house training officers to specific needs
- Pressure on workgroup participants from colleagues (we haven't got time for this)
- Implementation when project is completed only

# Review observations (aug 2011)

- ✓ Craftmanship
- ✓ Resilience in operations
- ✓ In tense situations (SWAT teams) everyone is alert
- Security awareness
- Difference in commitment between 'young' and 'old' officers
- Quality of feedback

# Discussion

# Respectful interaction

- The story goes ....
- Building 'assertiveness'

	1 = not at all, 2= to some extent, 3 = a great deal	1	2	3
Trust	People are able to rely on others	0	25	21
	People trust each other	2	31	13
Respect	People respect the nature of one another's job activities.	2	25	19
	People show a good deal of respect for each other	4	29	13
Honesty	People report significant mistakes even if others do not notice that a mistake is made	11	27	6

# Heedful interrelating

- Contribution: work in groups, changing places
- Representation: the information system
- Subordination: young vs old

	Disagree	agree
During an average day, people interact often enough to build a clear picture of the current situation	7	39

# Collective mindfulness

Preoccupation with failure	1. When discussing emerging problems with coworkers, we usually discuss what to look out for.	5,02	*
	2. We spend time identifying activities we do not want to go wrong.	4,96	
Reluctance to simplify	3. We discuss alternatives as to how to go about our normal work activities.	4,77	**
Sensitivity to operations	4. We discuss our unique skills with each other so that we know who has relevant specialized skills and knowledge.	4,00	*
	5. We have a good “map” of each person’s talents and skills	4,35	*
Commitment to resilience	6. We talk about mistakes and ways to learn from them.	4,72	
	7. When errors happen, we discuss how we could have prevented them.	5,35	
Defence to expertise	8. When attempting to resolve a problem, we take advantage of the unique skills of our colleagues.	4,80	*
	9. When a crisis occurs, we rapidly pool our collective expertise to attempt to resolve it	5,02	*

\* significantly lower  $p < 0,05$  \*\* significantly higher  $p < 0,05$  (compared to nurses Vogus & Sutcliffe, 2007)

# Achieving more reliability

- Reducing volatility  
fairly successful: cups, checklists, waiting cell, training
- Enhancing mindfulness  
'thin ice': reducing helplessness, risk awareness, feedback/ assertiveness, more proactive attitude
- Conditions
  - Leadership away from command and control
  - Seeing change as a continuous process

# Consequences from an HRO perspective

- More tension, more heedful interrelating
- Managing the sense of urgency: a strong reaction on weak signals (also cuts, helplessness)
- Special attention to the retention of knowledge
- Integrating specialists a necessity?
- Strategy follows operations?
- We protocollize in panic?