

NSW CST: FEMALES FILL CRITICAL BATTLEFIELD ROLE

Trained By SEALs, in support of NSW:
First female cultural support team deploys

They travel from village to village in Afghanistan, dressed in Muslim head scarves and Type II Navy Working Uniforms. These female Sailors are armed with weapons, Afghan cultural knowledge and a desire to help Naval Special Warfare win the war in Afghanistan one rural community at a time. The women of NSW's Cultural Support Teams (CST) are building rapport and trust amongst the country's women and children and improving counterinsurgency objectives in the process.

For years, forward deployed operators have experienced difficulty connecting with a group that makes up more than half of the Afghan population – its women and children. Due to cultural taboos associated with male soldiers speaking to or searching Afghan women and children, Village Stability Operations (VSO) suffered. To keep in good standing within the villages, open a dialogue with local women and accomplish the mission, NSW is developing a new type of enabler to accompany operators on missions that could benefit from personnel of the female gender.

Meeting The Need

Cultural Support Teams first came into existence in late 2010 when it became obvious to commanders that having male soldiers pat down Afghan women for weapons and ask them questions about enemy activity was not working, in fact it was seriously upsetting and infuriating to the very people with whom operators were trying to build trusting and productive relationships.

Male operators were not bridging the gap between Afghan women and western forces, they were causing a rift. The military solution to this problem was to train women and embed them with special operation forces (SOF) to communicate and interact with the women within the country.

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Karim Delgado

primary motivation to join CST was to broaden my skill sets as a person within the Naval Special Warfare community. A lot of the NSW mission now involves village stability; this is the best way for me to be at the forefront of the mission.”

Training for the Mission

Having an enabler turn into a hindrance rather than an asset is a risk operators take every time anyone accompanies them on a mission. The standards for enablers are set high – CST members are treated no differently.

“The intent is not to make a shooter; it isn’t to make a female SEAL. The intent is to produce an enabler who can stand next to a SEAL in the environment, in the population, who won’t be a hindrance, who won’t get in the way and who

can take care of themselves in an extreme situation,” said Booher. “We want to let [operators] know that the enabler we are going to provide them is someone who has a requisite level of training, has been screened, and they are not just getting someone who has been pushed through a very short pipeline.”

The idea of the formalized training for these women was centered on supporting the SEAL operator. Booher and CEU Senior Enlisted Advisor, Senior Chief Special Warfare Operator Daniel Gearhart, both prior BUD/S instructors and seasoned operators, made it a point to ask the right questions when it came to what training the women receive.

“I am an operator first and foremost, but I understand that there is a need for this capability,” said Booher. “This allowed me to look at the training and say, ‘As an operator, what would I be looking for? As an operator, what do I need to provide other operators on the battlefield that will put them in their comfort zone?’”

Still in the process of being formalized, the future screening process for CST will consist of submitting a written package that includes commanding officer and command master chief endorsements. Applicants will then be evaluated by an NSW psychologist and have to run a “PRT Plus,” a Navy PRT to include dead hangs for women. The CEU staff and a NSW Group 10 representative will then conduct oral boards to determine if the applicants have the required fortitude and mental toughness to be accepted into training.

After a successful oral board screening, candidates will enter the first of three stages of a six-month training program. During the first or “assessment” stage, candidates join the other members of the CEU for two weeks of physically strenuous teambuilding.

“During this time the females are actually earning their spot on the NSW team. To do that, they have to get through this six-month course,” said Booher.

The staff uses some of the same drills and exercises used to train operators. According to Booher, CST members have to be able to understand what operators go through.

“They will experience slivers of what SEALs experience during BUD/s. They will be getting wet, doing pushups, remediation and team building,” Booher said. “The intent is not to make anyone quit, the intent is team building; a rite of passage so to speak.”

(Right) CST members participate in weapons training to prepare for upcoming missions.

(Left) The first female CST members pose for a group photo while training in Afghanistan. These five women will play a key role in village stability operations by virtue of their mission.



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Drawing from the success and lessons learned by the initial CSTs that deployed with various special operations components over the past year and a half, NSW recognized the overall benefit of the teams and moved forward to create a training program tailored to its mission set.

“We had seen the positive effects of CST or female engagement teams in the other SOF components and it was obvious that we at Naval Special Warfare would benefit if we had similar capabilities,” said NSW’s head of plans, policy and strategy. “Some of the women that have deployed have been able to do things with the locals, especially in a country like Afghanistan, which men could never have done. This has led to greater success on some of the missions, greater amounts of information gathered, reduction in tensions, avoided conflict or civilian casualties and other positive effects.”

According to Lt. Jason Booher, officer in charge of NSW Cultural Engagement Unit (CEU) and CST, there is a need for women to work alongside SEALs during village stability operations in Afghanistan.

“The mission that was the genesis of the cultural support team is VSO,” said Booher. “The intent of VSO is to engage the people – to win hearts and minds. Females embedded with SEALs means they will stand next to SEALs in the population and engage with the women and children and truly get access to the 50 or 60 percent of the population that we have missed until now.”

While women deployed with NSW have assisted teams before, the NSW CST program was a yearlong work in progress, aimed at training and preparing its CST candidates to seamlessly integrate with SEAL teams.

“Our training is more extensive than that of MARSOC and USASOC,” said Booher. “NSW has specifically taken more time to learn what the other SOF entities have done, improve upon it and tailor it to NSW.”

The NSW policy, plans and strategy team recognized some operators might have mixed reactions about operating with non-SEALs, but the commanders in theater are seeing the positive results of the women’s presence in country.

For the women deployed, it’s a chance to contribute to NSW counterinsurgency missions and broaden their qualification and effectiveness as enablers.

“I wanted to be part of CST for multiple reasons. First and foremost, I believe that female engagement is a key part of public diplomacy and counterinsurgency strategy,” said a deployed CST member. “My other

The second stage focuses on soldiering proficiency, known as “green skills,” competencies that will enable them to go out and work with Navy SEALs. This is considered the longest portion of training because unlike Army or Marine Corps CST candidates, the Navy does not teach these skills in boot camp. The members attend the basic soldiering course, direct support course, they learn rope skills and rappel training, fast rope training, and spend a few weeks in the field doing land navigation and field work. In addition, another three weeks is devoted to weapons training and range time, all instructed and supervised by operators.

The final stage focuses on academics; women are trained on NSW and SOF history, irregular warfare theory, theatre operations and NSW mission planning and Afghan culture. After the formal stages are completed, CST members are sent to professional development. Courses include advanced medical training, exposure to child birthing and tactical debriefing. Afterward, if time allows, the members begin integrating with their assigned SEAL team during its work up cycle.

Throughout training, the staff of operators at the CEU emphasize that successful integration with the teams is largely the responsibility of the CST member.

“No one is going to treat them special because they’re female,” said Booher. “It’s their responsibility to show up and be capable of performing. They have to show up and be able to function in that world.”

“I tell them all the time that they have to earn their spot in that truck,” said Gearhart. “If a SEAL platoon is taking a female CST on a mission that means there isn’t a SEAL sitting in that seat. They have to earn that right.”

Although CST members have been thoroughly trained and given the tools to succeed, it is also up to the SEAL team to assess them. According to Booher and Gearhart, the team assesses an enabler’s strengths and weakness along with training them on the team’s tactics. This is a part of determining whether to take the enabler outside the wire.

While patrolling and earning that seat in a truck is the goal for CST members, operating with SOF comes with inherent risks. In 2011, Army CST

member 1st Lt. Ashley White and two Army Rangers were killed when a homemade bomb detonated shortly after their arrival in an Afghan compound. Acknowledging and fully understanding that risk, the five NSW CST women currently deployed have confidence in their abilities and preparation.

“We are confident in the training we have been provided and the capabilities of the SEALs we will support, but the potential for something to go wrong is always in the back of my mind,” said a deployed CST member.

“There is always danger for us and we are aware of that, but we know there are a lot of other duties that military men and women perform that are much more dangerous than ours,” said another CST member.

Hopes for the future

While Sailors and deployments are synonymous, the five female Sailors of NSW’s inaugural CST class deployed from Naval Air Station North Island with the hope that they will contribute to the Force and make a difference during their time in country.

“I hope that we are able to exceed all the expectations placed upon us and that the CST program becomes successful, established, and continues to grow,” said a CST member. “I hope that the NSW units we support recognize our value and create a demand within the community for greater CST support.”

The CEU staff shares the same sentiments. “I think those five women are trained as good, if not better than any other CST out in that field,” said Booher. “We have provided the SEAL teams down range with a capability that they can work with.”

MC2 Dominique Canales