

# Mission Command:

## Small Teams in the U.S. Border Patrol

*by Robert W. Edwards*

The U.S. Border Patrol divides personnel into shifts using line units, or patrol groups. Line units are the norm throughout the U.S. Border Patrol, dividing a 24-hour rotation into shifts filled by agents at each station within the 20 sectors in the U.S. Border Patrol. Most stations use small teams, like all-terrain vehicle units and horse patrol units. However, the idea of creating autonomous clusters of small teams on patrol groups or line units as an employment construct has not been executed.

Line units are cumbersome, divided into groups or teams in an ad hoc nature not specifically aligned to an area or expertise, whereas personnel employed in small teams would be the most responsive in the field, functioning autonomously. On small teams, agents report to one or two supervisors, and those supervisors work hand-in-hand with agents, augmenting the team. On a patrol group, supervisors have oversight of greater field tasks and office assignments. They delegate agents and technology assets to traffic in the field, devise schedules, and approve office work products completed by subordinate agents. Small teams may also require less technology, as they are proactive in response to specifically mobile technology in the field. Versus line units or patrol groups that respond reactively to infrequently mobile and static technology. Unlike patrol groups—which are assigned arbitrarily on weekly or monthly schedules—small teams work in the same area day after day, gaining familiarity with traffic or other structural patterns of activity, and fostering subject matter expertise. Line unit agents never gain this familiarity with their assigned areas.

### **Small Teams: Mission Command**

Tactically and operationally, small teams would improve the U.S. Border Patrol's situational awareness along the border. Throughout the area of responsibility of any sector, and likewise

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## PAIC > DPAIC > WC > SOS > SBPA > BPA > MS

**PAIC:** Patrol Agent in Charge

**DPAIC:** Deputy Patrol Agent in Charge

**WC:** Watch Commander

**SOS:** Special Operations Supervisor

**SBPA:** Supervisory Border Patrol Agent

**BPA:** Border Patrol Agent

**MS:** Mission Support Personnel

**Figure 1. Border Patrol Command Structure**

station, in the U.S. Border Patrol, small teams would positively affect response rates and management as the primary method of personnel employment. Small teams would and do optimize the work output of the station's agents, more so than the current method of line units, or shifts. Small teams are characteristically more adaptive, rapidly mobile, and members work "autonomously."<sup>1</sup> The implementation of small teams is currently in use at the Tucson Station and elsewhere throughout the Border Patrol, but only as a force multiplier to enhance line units. To improve morale, effectiveness, efficiency, and reduce attrition, division of personnel into teams makes sense. Tucson Border Patrol Station, the largest in the Border Patrol as of 2014,<sup>2</sup> is an example of small teams employment, requiring a division of agents consisting of approximately 50 teams, with 10-12 Border Patrol Agents, and one to two Supervisory Border Patrol Agents. Managerial oversight remains with the Watch Commanders. Nested within each member of the small team construct is the "command intent"<sup>3</sup> of the station, provided by the Watch Commander.

Small teams at the Tucson Border Patrol Station are in short supply, due to the line unit factor, as not to deplete line units of agents and Supervisory Border Patrol Agents. Small teams, such as horse patrol units and the Tucson Station Mountain Team, are mission specific and rapidly mobile, as they work to respond to specific areas that are less feasible to access swiftly by line unit agents. Maximizing the efforts and skill sets of agents in the field with rapid response to risk managed<sup>4</sup> operations requires an agile

work force. Small teams are not cumbersome, with aligned purpose to the mission. They are swift to respond, without Supervisory Border Patrol Agent oversight or direction, thus providing autonomous initiative without slowed authorization from a Watch Commander.

A further proposal to align the small teams with leadership at the agent level entails selection of a Senior Patrol Agent. The Supervisory Border Patrol Agents from the Tucson Border Patrol Station select the Senior Patrol Agents, without consideration of seniority, based solely on merit. The Senior Patrol Agents fill Team Leader positions and peer the agents in the field. Further, Senior Patrol Agents mentor the agents and Supervisory Border Patrol Agents with tactical expertise.<sup>5</sup>

### **Line Units: Command and Control**

Numerous individual agents make up line units. Watch Commanders at the second line supervisory level and Supervisory Border Patrol Agents at the first line level conduct oversight of the line units. The number of agents, Watch Commanders and Supervisory Border Patrol Agents vary in ratio depending upon the number of agents on a patrol group, or line unit. See Figure 1 for the Border Patrol command structure working left (higher rank) to right (lower rank).

The Command and Control<sup>6</sup> aspect of the line unit relates to the "designated commander"<sup>7</sup> role of the Watch Commander, with direct oversight of the Supervisory Border Patrol Agents in the field, providing authorization for specific operational response tasks. Further,

Supervisory Border Patrol Agents report to the Watch Commander through a Tactical Operations Center, which possesses tactical control of risk management resources, like Air and Marine Operations assets, again through the auspices of the Watch Commander. Agents assigned to a line unit work in positions that change daily, weekly, and in some instances monthly if assigned to an ad hoc team or group assignment. Assignment to an ad hoc team or group is rare—for example, the sudden creation of such units to meet a surge in illegal alien entries into the U.S.—and once the team meets the mission or objective, the group or team returns to the line unit. A Special Operations Supervisor has oversight of the ad hoc or specialty units and teams.

**Line unit members may lack ownership of their daily assignments in an area of responsibility due to frequent changes in assignment, and in turn, lack familiarity with active intelligence of the area of responsibility.**

Agents assigned on a line unit remain in their assigned areas. This is despite a specific need for more manpower or resources in an area with mounting egress of illegal aliens into the U.S. It is common for illegal aliens to egress areas less patrolled by agents, and remote areas that have topographical obstacles, such as mountains or canyons. These areas are most prevalent for scouts and illegal aliens to seek illegal entry into the U.S. Increases in traffic, or illegal entries, will prompt supervisors to call for more manpower from different areas. However, this only creates gaps in coverage, requiring more adjustments of manpower. Small teams would enable flexibility to address traffic in the field without frequent adjustments of personnel. Small teams can also coordinate with other small teams working south to address gaps in borderline coverage.

## **Line Units vs. Small Teams: Pros and Cons of Each**

Line unit members may lack ownership of their daily assignments in an area of responsibility due to frequent changes in assignment, and in turn, lack familiarity with active intelligence of the area of responsibility. Agents respond to the field, or area of operations, with the intent to locate foot sign or visual. Some days a trail may be active, while the following day another trail is more active, and by the end of the week both trails may be inactive, all based on the observations of scouts in the area. A scout on a higher elevation monitors an agent tracking a group along a trail, and the group reroutes to areas less accessible to patrol agents.

It can take weeks to months for agents to assess a scout site as to activity or inactivity. By this time, agents may be reassigned to different areas on a line unit, losing familiarity with an area. Agents who are not consistently working the same area lack the day-to-day familiarity and continuity that occurs on a small team, and do not have the ability to provide a subject matter expert's knowledge of containment or deterrence of persons illegally entering the country. The expertise agents acquire while assigned to teams will assist oncoming teams with specific intelligence pertinent to their area of responsibility and available whole-of-government<sup>8</sup> assets.

The military's analysis approach for capability gaps is Doctrine, Organization, Training, Materiel, Leadership and Personnel, and Facilities. Analyzing the effectiveness of employing small teams throughout the Border Patrol would apply to Doctrine, Organization, Training, Leadership and Personnel. Doctrine would become accessible through the construct of Tactics, Techniques, and Procedures organized at the sector and station levels to accommodate the number of personnel and topography within the area of responsibility.

	Doctrine	Organization	Training	Leadership	Personnel
Teams	X	X	X	X	X
Line Units/Patrol Groups		X		X	

**Figure 2. Comparison of Small Team and Line Unit/Patrol Group Capability Gaps**

The organizational structure would change in the Border Patrol with the advent of a team’s approach, thus affecting Organization, and Training devised and incorporated in the teams’ development, through Tactics, Techniques, and Procedure development and training. Leadership would further be rearranged to provide teams leadership and oversight, while Personnel would be distributed to the field differently, but not changed in expertise, unless Tactics, Techniques, and Procedure’s decide otherwise (i.e. Scout identification training, tracking in teams, etc.).

Small teams meet ad hoc to discuss pertinent intelligence akin to their assigned areas and station requirements without the constraints of police musters or shift change briefs, which are the common method of exchanging information for the line unit. Patrol group agents may respond to the field individually, and require overwatch (Air and Marine Operations assets) for support, versus a small team that works together, and does not require immediate overwatch support.<sup>9</sup>  
<sup>10</sup> In addition, small teams’ members apply to teams through the Patrol Agent in Charge, and the member’s acceptance onto the teams is dependent on multiple factors. The Border Patrol Council is involved in the selection process, and an agent’s seniority in the Border Patrol is considered prior to acceptance onto a small team.

### Implementation of Small Teams

As previously discussed, small teams are in use today at the Tucson Border Patrol Station. To implement small teams throughout the area of responsibility (and cease the use of line units) would require a pilot launch of one shift, or line unit broken up into teams. The pilot launch would allow assessment of small team effectiveness versus the effectiveness of line units. Over

the course of six months to a year, agents and Supervisory Border Patrol Agents would work together collecting active intelligence on their assigned teams, collaborating with both oncoming teams and teams from previous shifts. The team’s level of effectiveness is dependent upon the team’s agents working together with the supervision of one to two first line supervisors. It may be necessary to have a team of 5 to 6 working on each patrol group, or line unit, to start, which would make each small team the center of gravity per patrol group, providing essential information of activity in the area of responsibility. The teams would be comprised of volunteers, presumably the high-achievers at a station, whose initiative would lead each line unit.

The division of a line unit into teams would require policy change. According to the Community Work Group for Community Development, “Government Policy” may include the “support of an issue” by policy makers, or members of management and their subordinates.<sup>11</sup> The support of the concept to divide line units into teams requires a mass consensus of the station’s agents and the Border Patrol’s command staff. Without a unified effort of all team members, to include supervisors, a team approach to operations may fail. A smaller operational unit may be more flexible and responsive, but it can also implode faster than a larger unit if not managed or unified correctly.

Agents working in a team dynamic are more aware of their peers’ strengths and weaknesses. This knowledge aids in organizing the team to work criminal alien traffic. For example, if an agent or agents are stronger at sign cutting than other members of the team, they may lead a tracking operation, while a less experienced

agent may cut ahead and provide situational awareness for the agent(s) following the drug trafficking group's sign. A technology-savvy agent who has more knowledge of computer based programs for compiling statistical data and accessing intelligence information would perform these tasks. As a final example, the agent or agents most familiar with the area of responsibility may set strategic goals for the team, insofar as realistically determining an achievable benchmark for seizures within a given period.

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## Challenges

The concept of small teams as an overarching framework of employing personnel within the Border Patrol would create a cultural change, as the replacement of shifts or line units for teams would alter the norm. The initial reaction of Border Patrol personnel may be hesitation, and there may be pushback from the Border Patrol Union, but over time a vested "shared belief"<sup>12</sup> in the small team concept would become the new norm. A cultural shift toward small team employment of personnel may spur new ideas from agents working in teams, and trust in management should improve. As autonomous decision-making by agents increases, management's confidence will likewise increase. A start to small team implementation may be adding one small team per line unit, or patrol group, in transition from line units to small teams.

In the "8-Step Process" Dr. Kotter begins with "Create a sense of urgency."<sup>13</sup> The need for employing agents to the Tucson Station area of responsibility in a more responsive, unified method requires an assessment of what is lacking in current use of the line unit. The key

to reaching "Step 6: Short term wins" may lie in developing a pilot project, six months to a year in duration, that proves teams are superior to line units. "Pressing harder after successes" (Step 7) involves fielding more teams in the Border Patrol, and increasing the consensus of agents, union stewards, and management.

Teams learn from each other, internally and externally. The members of teams learn from other members of the teams, and their weaknesses and strengths used to help the team reach its goals or complete its mission. As the Army calls for adaptability of their leaders,<sup>14</sup> the Border Patrol likewise requires adaptability of its leaders and agents in the field to fulfill the duties of a Border Patrol Agent. Adaptive employment of personnel is in current use in the U.S. Border Patrol within Special Operations Groups, however, small teams should become less ad hoc and more the mainstay, if not the norm.

Alien smuggling organizations and drug-trafficking organizations provide illegal aliens with camouflage gear and coach them to run when spotted by Immigration Officers, which exacerbates the need for an adaptive workforce. Response of personnel should be rapid, and the team concept at the Tucson Station is the most suitable method. Once situational understanding<sup>15</sup> of an area of responsibility provides context to a team's response needs (resources, technology, unified effort with other law enforcement assets), a determination to rapidly mobilize toward the threat is made, and risk management<sup>16</sup> follows with appropriate resources to respond.

A line unit is fractious. Its parts, several line agents assigned to a portion of the area of responsibility, are lost in communication if a section is working criminal traffic in a remote area. The difficulties inherent in working across separate parts continue when a call is made for more agents to assist with a checkpoint situation with constrained manpower. A small team remains cognizant of its members' whereabouts,

as the members usually work together within an assigned section (or grids) within a 10-15 mile stretch of land, providing ease in communication. Line units stretch 20-25 miles apart at any given time, complicating communication and collaboration.

The National Border Patrol Council is the union that represents Border Patrol Agents. The National Border Patrol Council is a component of the American Federation of Government Employees. The American Federation of Government Employees is comprised of “35 separate councils, to include the Veteran’s Administration Council and the [National Border Patrol Council].”<sup>17</sup> According to the National Border Patrol Council, councils can exist if “they comply with the [American Federation of Government Employees]’s constitution.”<sup>18</sup> The National Border Patrol Council provides support to the Border Patrol’s labor force below first line supervisors. On the National Border Patrol Council website, under “The [National Border Patrol Council] Mission,” it states, “We safeguard conditions of employment, agreements, practices, employee rights, and the labor laws of the United States.”<sup>19</sup> By this measure, the National Border Patrol Council has leverage with management over employment at the Tucson Station if it entails the selection criteria for specific details or missions. In this context, the use of small teams should be a mainstay in the Border Patrol, not an ad hoc or temporary detail. Even then, if personnel are selected for a team, as they are for horse patrol units and Canine Handler selection, then the National Border Patrol Council would have a say in the selection procedure. The employment of personnel in the field at the Tucson Station currently has a bargaining agreement that allows agents to select the shifts they prefer. The preferences are in a tiered selection of their choices, the first being their most desired. Management officials and union stewards from the Tucson Station divide the units, based on

seniority of staff. This allows for an unbiased process of dividing shifts into equal units, in a near even number of agents on each shift, or line unit. Supervisory Border Patrol Agents and Watch Commanders likewise provide their desired shifts. However, higher management will assign these individuals to shifts based on manpower needs and management objectives. The line units may remain with the selected personnel for a three or six-month rotation, but usually less than a year.

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### **Recommendation**

Dividing personnel into teams and shifting the line units from a centralized command structure to a decentralized command structure allows for ownership of every autonomous agent. Make the change for a year and see what happens. The worst that could happen is that the culture shock would be too significant to maintain the command and control of leadership, or that most agents would not have a “shared belief”<sup>20</sup> in the small team concept. The best that could happen is a significant increase in effectiveness and morale amongst the agents in the Border Patrol. Lastly, leadership may improve with both current leaders and future leaders; leaders who would rise from a smaller team dynamic, a consequence of allowing more autonomy. Experiential knowledge of leadership gained from an agent’s autonomous work environment within a team construct will provide the station and the Border Patrol with improved supervisory qualities prior to promotion.

The autonomous agent in the field makes decisions, nested within the team’s strategy. With the “commander’s intent”<sup>21</sup> conveyed by the supervisor succinctly to the team members,

the agents, make decisions without authorization of a supervisor. Capable agents within a team work autonomously and perform the duties of a Border Patrol Agent more effectively than a line agent performs the same duties. The line agent may require authorization from a supervisor before performing their tasks. In addition, unfamiliarity with the assignment or work environment inhibits confidence and interferes with decision-making, slowing their progress of detection and deterrence of criminal activity.

The small team concept is already underway at Tucson Station. Its methodology and future improvements, consensus and acceptance by management and agents in the field will depend upon lessons learned, through a similar construct to the Army's Center for Army Lessons Learned, which "archives lessons and best practices."<sup>22</sup> At first, the small teams pilot project may have hiccups in implementation, strategic design, and personnel embrace. A two-year study may be necessary to provide the most adequate statistical data, and to hold after action interviews and discussions are a necessity. Increasing small teams utilization by the Border Patrol will depend upon mitigation of vulnerabilities like Border Patrol Union constraints and continuity of information.

Training the line agents, to function well as a small team requires long periods of employment amongst a sustained unit. To build the trust fundamental to small teams will require greater connectivity between the agents and supervisors, which may require increased training together. This concept would entail further research and analysis. Additionally, training of a line unit may necessitate the creation of educational brochures and standards, further creating a small team's doctrine.

Recommendation: Perform an operational simulation for determining whether small teams are more effective than patrol groups or line units. Simulations used in the military would likewise work in the U.S. Border Patrol. There are numerous simulations to pick from and solicitation of vendors may occur at Headquarters for appropriate fit in the Border Patrol. A smaller scale simulation performed at Headquarters level will replicate at the sector and station level. **IAJ**

## Notes

1 U.S. Department of the Army, Headquarters, *Special Operations*, Army Doctrine Publication (ADP) 3-05, 13.

2 U.S. Customs and Border Protection, *Tucson Station*, accessed June 1, 2017, <https://www.cbp.gov/border-security/along-us-borders/border-patrol-sectors/tucson-sector-arizona/tucson-station>.

3 Ibid.

4 U.S. Customs and Border Protection, *Border Patrol 2012-2016 Strategic Plan*, accessed December 20, 2016, [https://www.cbp.gov/sites/default/files/documents/bp\\_strategic\\_plan.pdf](https://www.cbp.gov/sites/default/files/documents/bp_strategic_plan.pdf), 12.

5 Interview with Gutierrez, Eugene, Supervisory Border Patrol Agent, Tucson Border Patrol Station, August 20, 2017.

6 Joint Chiefs of Staff. *Command and Control for Joint Land Operations* (Joint Publication 3-31). February 24, 2014.

7 Ibid.

- 8 U.S. Customs and Border Protection, *2012-2016 Border Patrol Strategic Plan*, accessed June 1, 2017, [https://www.cbp.gov/sites/default/files/documents/bp\\_strategic\\_plan.pdf](https://www.cbp.gov/sites/default/files/documents/bp_strategic_plan.pdf). 18.
- 9 “Cuts” are shorthand for “sign-cutting”, which is a method of looking for disturbances in the terrain, or plant life, that would provide evidence of illegal aliens walking through the area of responsibility.
- 10 U.S. Customs and Border Protection, *2012-2016 Border Patrol Strategic Plan*, accessed June 1, 2017, [https://www.cbp.gov/sites/default/files/documents/bp\\_strategic\\_plan.pdf](https://www.cbp.gov/sites/default/files/documents/bp_strategic_plan.pdf). 18.
- 11 *Community Toolbox*, Workgroup for Community Involvement and Development, University of Kansas, accessed June 20, 2017, <http://ctb.ku.edu/en/table-of-contents/implement/changing-policies/overview/main>.
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- 14 Department of the Army, Army Doctrine Publication (ADP) 7-0, *Training Units and Developing Leaders* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, August 2012), 10.
- 15 Department of the Army, ADP 6-0 C-2 (2014), 3.
- 16 U.S. Customs and Border Protection, *Border Patrol 2012-2016 Strategic Plan*, 4.
- 17 National Border Patrol Council, “NBPC Response to New Yorker Article,” accessed February 18, 2017, <http://www.bpunion.org/index.php/newsroom/press-releases/1866-nbpc-response-to-new-yorker-article>.
- 18 Ibid.
- 19 Ibid.
- 20 Ibid.
- 21 Department of the Army, ADP 6-0 C-2 (2014), 2.
- 22 Combined Arms Center, “Center for Army Lessons Learned,” accessed May 20, 2017, <http://usacac.army.mil/organizations/mccoe/call>.