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Operational Manoeuvre Group

Operation SOHIL LARAM II, Kandahar Province, February 2008

Sean M. Maloney

It is natural for military historians to focus on purely national issues and national history. Indeed, writing about coalition warfare is notoriously difficult, particularly when it comes to using sources from all of the key national players, sources subject to uneven availability. Then there is the Canadian proclivity towards making up for lost time in military history affairs, which generates gravitation towards examining Canadian combat arms units to the exclusion of the activities of higher headquarters and support units. Indeed, we expect our larger allies, with their more robust history production apparatus, to take care of themselves and our coalition history. As a result, a danger exists that we may overlook critical aspects of our military history particularly when we have allied forces under Canadian command.

In addition to providing a battle group, a provincial reconstruction team, special operations forces, and mentoring teams to the war in Afghanistan, Canada holds rotating command of the NATO-led International Security Assistance Force's (ISAF) Regional Command (South) Headquarters. RC (South) is responsible for four brigade-sized national commands or task forces

ABSTRACT: In February 2008 Regional Battle Group (South) in Afghanistan, based on The 1st Battalion, The Royal Gurkha Rifles supported by Canadian “enablers” and working with Afghan national security forces, conducted a mission known as Operation SOHIL LARAM II in the Maywand district of Kandahar province. A weak NATO presence coupled with a corrupt police force had allowed the Taliban to turn Maywand into a safe haven. Following the dismissal of the police force, Op SOHIL LARAM II was successful in disrupting Taliban operations, reasserting government authority and regaining the confidence of the local population. In addition, the disruption of Taliban forces allowed the relief in place of Canadian battle groups to proceed without the usual interference.

that conform to the main provinces in southern Afghanistan: TF Helmand (British); TF Oruzgan (Dutch); TF Zabol (Romanian and American) and TF Kandahar (Canada). In addition, an Afghan corps headquarters, 205 Corps, is the counterpart to RC (South) and each province boasts an Afghan National Army (ANA) brigade. For the most part, each ANA brigade is twinned with each ISAF brigade and will control between one and four kandaks, or Afghan battalion-sized forces.

Scarce national resources or “enablers” like helicopters, close air support, unmanned aerial

vehicles (UAVs), various Intelligence Surveillance and Target Acquisition (ISTAR) capabilities, Civil-Military Cooperation (CIMIC) and artillery operate everywhere in RC (South) depending on where they are needed, but usually come under the control of a provincial brigade headquarters for the duration of a given operation and then they revert to national control. Consequently, few operations in Afghanistan are conducted by a single country on its own.

In January 2008, Canada took command of RC (South) Headquarters. Led by Major-General Marc Lessard, RC (South) HQ deployed resources in Kandahar Province in order to supplement operations already underway commanded by Brigadier-General Guy Laroche, the commander of Task Force Kandahar. One of those resources was an entity called Regional Battle Group (South) or RBG(S). The RBG(S) acted as a regional reserve force and could be employed by RC (South) HQ anywhere in the region it deemed necessary. The only self-imposed caveat was that the force had to be used to generate enduring operational-level effects, not only short-term tactical or provincial-level effects.

The United Kingdom assigned the 1st Battalion, The Royal Gurkha

Rifles as RBG(S) in the fall of 2007 “without strings,” meaning that the usual restrictive national caveats were lifted for the duration. This light infantry battalion, composed of Nepalese Gurkhas led by British officers and supplemented with Canadian “enablers,” proved to be a formidable and agile asset and significantly contributed to achieving ISAF’s aims in Kandahar Province. This article will examine Operation SOHIL LARAM II, an operation conducted by the Regional Battle Group (South) in Maywand district of Kandahar province in late February 2008.

The Operational Level Situation

The situation in RC (South) in early 2008 was calm relative to previous years. The United Kingdom had, since 2006, tripled the size of its forces in Helmand province, from a battle group to nearly a brigade. Headway was made in the Musa Qala area and even some senior Taliban commanders were starting to join the PTS amnesty programme. In Oruzgan province, the Dutch task force controlled the main population centres, while an Australian special operations task force kept the Taliban

off balance elsewhere. Zabol, recently taken over by a Romanian battle group, still boasted an American Provincial Reconstruction Team (PRT) and for the most part kept the vital Ring Road South (RRS) open.

In Kandahar province, the Canadian battlegroup and an Afghan National Army company kicked the Taliban out of Arghandab district, less than five kilometers from Kandahar City. This last move was the latest in a campaign to block Taliban attempts to take control of a district that abutted Ring Road South and the city. The enemy had, since 2006, tried to interdict the four main routes into Kandahar City. Zharey district was, in January 2008, garrisoned by ANA and Afghan National Police and there was a substantial amount of development taking place. Over in Panjwayi district, the Taliban that had been pushed out of Zharey mounted an IED (improvised explosive device) campaign on the main roads there. Taliban still operated in Zharey, but unlike back in 2006-07, they were unable to seriously control the population. There was virtually no enemy activity around Kandahar Air Field (KAF), nor was the enemy operating along Highway 4, the main trade route between Afghanistan and Pakistan in the south.

Task Force Kandahar and the ANA’s 205 Corps did not have the forces nor the resources to garrison the entire province, so they focused on districts that were vital ground. Northern districts like Khakriz, Ghorak and Sha Wali Kot had varying levels of Taliban influence but for the most part that influence remained local.

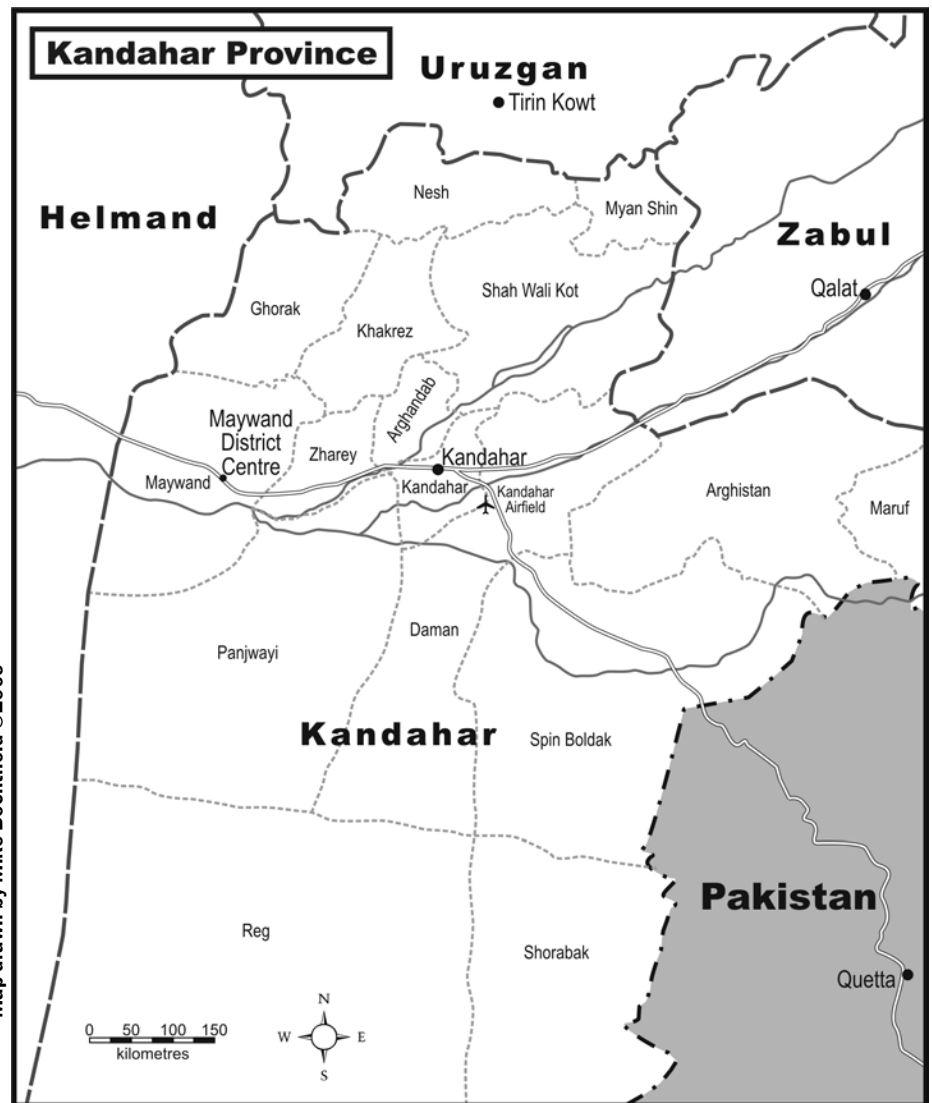


The 1st Battalion, The Royal Gurkha Rifles, acted as the Regional Battlegroup (South) reserve force in 2007-08. 1 RGR developed a close working relationship with the Canadian task force.

The Taliban maintained training sites, weapons dumps, and command nodes inside Pakistan, notably in and around the city of Quetta, where the Taliban command for the south, the Quetta Shura, was located. The modus operandi was to infiltrate fighters individually or in small numbers into Afghanistan, smuggle in weapons and ammunition separately, mate the two and then fight. Suicide bombers had a separate but parallel system. To mount any sort of operation inside Kandahar City or in the adjacent districts took time. A command node (or nodes depending on the size of the force) had to be established first, followed by a logistics node to stockpile weapons and ammo. "Rat lines" consisting of safe houses, sympathizers in the transportation community, and facilitators of all types had to be positioned and activated. Notably, the rat lines sometimes worked in reverse for Taliban casualty evacuation.

These shadowy networks were notoriously difficult to track down, in part because the police forces (the exception was the National Directorate of Security (NDS – Afghan Secret Police), which was small but fairly effective) were not capable of taking a sophisticated approach to doing so. Checkpoints and police patrols could be bribed, others could be intimidated, still others adopted a "live and let live" policy. ISAF and OEF forces, however, maintained steady pressure on the enemy system to generate as much friction as possible within it.

The Taliban also tried their hand at establishing a parallel government, but this generally took negative forms as opposed to competitive forms. Attacking schools and the health care system in order to deny effective government services was not the same as actually providing parallel services, but there were small numbers of Taliban "judges" and



there were "wandering Mullahs" proselytizing in the rural areas, all backed up with a sophisticated intimidation campaign that made the Taliban look more powerful than they actually were, especially in the rural areas. In other districts, the Taliban co-opted corrupt local leaders, or other men who played both sided against the middle for sheer survival or profit or both. These people tended to overlap with the narcotic producers in certain areas of RC (South).

The situation as it stood in late January 2008 was that the enemy was incapable of interdicting the main highways throughout RC (South) and failed to interfere with operations at

Kandahar Air Field. The highways and the airfield are absolutely critical to the ISAF, OEF and Afghan efforts in RC (South). Second, the Taliban had not taken Kandahar City. Control of Kandahar City is critical to the control of southern Afghanistan both geographically and psychologically: not only is it a transportation hub, it is also the religious/political centre of the region. Weakened in all the adjacent districts, thwarted in their latest endeavour in Arghandab district, the Quetta Shura was at a crossroads.

If the Quetta Shura hoped to move back to the heady days of 2006 when they seriously contested coalition control of Zharey and



Ch-47 Chinooks like this one conducted the night airmobile insertion of 1 RGR into the Band-e Timor communities in Maywand district during the opening stages of Op SOHIL LARAM II.

Panjwayi districts, mounted an incessant suicide bomb campaign in the city and showered Kandahar Air Field with rockets nearly every night, the networks, command nodes, and logistics nodes had to be re-built nearly everywhere. The cells in place had to be revitalized, reinforced, and resupplied. Consequently, the networks in the districts in the next ring away from the city had to be revitalized first as a precondition. As it stood in early 2008, if the Taliban were unable to achieve the saliency they had in 2006, they would lose even more credibility with the population. That credibility was eroded daily with each new government reconstruction or governance initiative.

The generalities of this situation were known in RC (South) and in Task Force Kandahar in early 2008 – the pressure had to be kept up in an overall sense across the region. The issue in Kandahar province, however,

was the upcoming relief-in-place (RIP) of the 3rd Battalion, R22eR battlegroup with 2nd Battalion, Princess Patricia's Canadian Light Infantry. In the past, the enemy exploited less than seamless RIPs to the detriment of the departing and arriving forces. The arriving force was usually inexperienced and took time to get up to speed with the deep nuances of operating in the districts and communities. Disruptive activity by coalition forces could shield the RIP and buy the incoming forces time to acclimatize.

At the same time, enemy forces in the peripheral districts tended to operate in "seams." They understood the problems of coordination between coalition partners on the artificial boundary lines established by staffs and understood that coalition control lessened the further away from the main population centres that they operated. If the Taliban hoped

to revitalize their networks, they would work out of those seams first, use them as staging areas, and then infiltrate and support their forces in districts adjacent to the city. The combination of these factors pointed the planning staffs from RBG(S), TFK, and RC (South) towards one particular district – Maywand.

Maywand district lies, from east to west, between Zharey district and Helmand province; Ring Road South runs straight through the middle of the district, through the prosperous agricultural community of Hutel. From north to south, Maywand is sandwiched between the mountainous Ghorak district and the Arghandab river and then the inhospitable Reg Desert. The Dasht, as the wide open plain is called, is a millennia-old trade and transit route between the Indian subcontinent and Persia.

Operationally, Maywand was a seam between Task Force Helmand and Task Force Kandahar, right smack dab in the middle. The district had a reputation as a singularly large rat line connecting extensive infiltration routes in the Helmand river valley that came in from Pakistan, to the western edge of Zharey district and the western-most point of Panjwayi district. Intelligence analysts assumed over the years that the southern part of the district, an elongated series of communities called Band-e Timor, was a Taliban stronghold, out of reach because of the priorities to protect the city and far enough south from the main highway to be off the beaten path. Word filtered out the previous year that there was even a functional Taliban shadow government complete with judges operating there.

The district leader and his police had a reputation for being brutally corrupt but because he had been appointed by the current governor, he appeared untouchable. Rumours abounded that his police hi-jacked World Food Program (WFP) aid trucks with impunity and even executed their drivers back in the summer of 2007 because WFP refused to pay him off. There was no Afghan National Army presence. Tribally, Maywand was dominated by Noorzai and familial connections between the district and the border city of Spinboldak reportedly involved narcotics smuggling. In short, it was an ideal district to house a Taliban logistics node and rat line.

There had been two coalition forays into Maywand back in 2007. The 2 RCR battlegroup conducted operations through the eastern portion of Band-e Timor with a company group in May, while the 1 RGR's predecessor RGB(S), the 1st Battalion, Royal Welsh (The Royal Welsh Fusiliers) essentially conducted a similar operation in the

fall, but these were independent and temporary operations generally not coupled with Afghan efforts in the district.

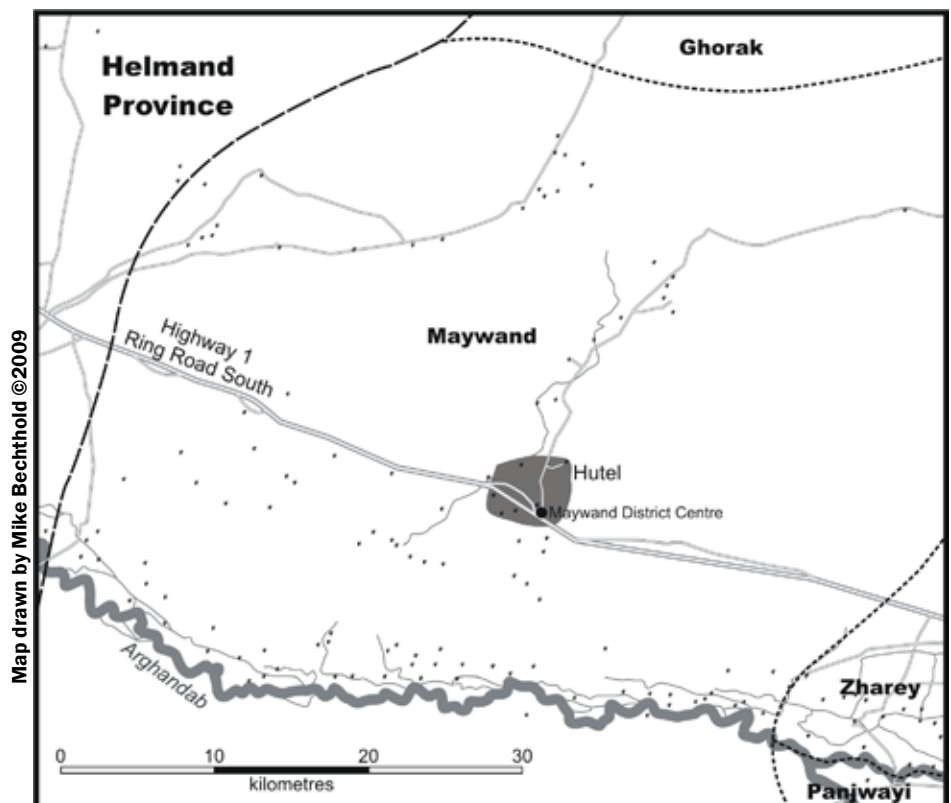
The potential operational-level effects of inserting the Regional Battlegroup (South) into Maywand district were considerable. It would disrupt the ratline into Zharey and Panjwayi districts, especially during the RIP. It would demonstrate to the Taliban that coalition forces did not fear operating in districts they did not traditionally operate in and that coalition forces would operate with impunity. Such an operation would also enhance security along Ring Road South, the link between Kandahar Air Field and Task Force Helmand.

The main problem, as the planners knew, was that without an enduring coalition presence the enemy would eventually re-infiltrate the district and be back in business. "Emptying the garbage" as the Canadians called it, or as the British named it, "mowing the lawn" had its uses, however. Disruption without

occupation was not optimal, but there was no apparent solution to that problem in the initial stages of the planning process, so SOHIL LARAM II started off conceptually as a large-scale RBG(S) raid.

Task Organization

RBG(S) or Task Force TIGER was based on 1st Battalion, The Royal Gurkha Rifles (1 RGR). Led by Lieutenant-Colonel Jonny Bourne, 1 RGR normally had three light infantry companies. In Afghanistan, however, 1 RGR detached one company to Helmand province, leaving two infantry companies available for RBG(S) operations: "A" Company led by Major Paul "Pitch" Pitchfork, and "C" Company led by Major Will Kefford.¹ There was a support company broken down into two Fire Support Groups (machine guns, snipers) and a mortar platoon of six 82 mm mortars. 1 RGR had its own doctor and medical team. In terms of mobility, one company was transported in Vector



Map drawn by Mike Bechthold ©2009



“A” Company 1 RGR conducts a compound search on Objective CHELSEA. This action would stimulate enemy movement and make their leaders more vulnerable to other coalition action.

The Plan

Planning SOHIL LARAM II was a essentially a three-way dialogue between the 1 RGR, TFK, and RBG(S) staffs. That dialogue established the justification as to exactly why the Gurkha battalion would be employed in Maywand district; conceptually how the battle group would be employed, with several options depending on transportation availability; and the coordination and deconfliction aspects. All of this had to be approved by Major-General Marc Lessard after his multinational staff at Regional Command (South) gave the thumbs up.

Op SOHIL LARAM II was designed to achieve a number of effects. The most obvious was the disruption of enemy activity in Maywand district, flushing out and destroying leadership targets which would result in positive effects both Helmand and Kandahar provinces. As for the district itself, the operation was designed to leave the local population with a positive impression of the coalition forces, ANA and ANP with the hope that this would serve as a basis for future operations intended to establish a permanent Afghan government presence throughout the district. Finally, the operation was designed to improve the police presence along Highway 1 by reconstructing ANP checkpoints, many of which were rudimentary at best, partially-manned and nearly indefensible.

There were a number of other reasons to conduct a Maywand

vehicles, essentially a six-wheeled, uparmoured Pinzgauer truck, and WMIK Landrovers armed with .50 cal machine guns and M-19 grenade launchers. The other company was carried by a squadron of Viking tracked oversnow vehicles armed with 7.62mm general purpose machine guns and crewed by Royal Marines. Small portable bridges and fascines were carried to assist in moving across water obstacles that criss-crossed the areas near the river. 1 RGR had also just conducted two airmobile operations, one in northern Kandahar province, and the other into the Chora Valley in Oruzgan with the Australian SAS Regiment, and was proficient in those types of operations as well.

1 RGR had also worked closely with the Canadian battlegroup on at least two occasions in Zharey and Panjwayi districts. In each operation, a Gurkha company operated under Canadian battlegroup command. 1 RGR was short on long-range firepower, however. Though the

Gurkhas were equipped with a variety of mortars, Lieutenant-Colonel Bourne requested and received a two-gun detachment of M-777 155 mm guns, two 81 mm mortars and a troop of TLAV APCs² led by Lieutenant Candice Dunn from the newly-arrived “B” Battery, 2 Royal Canadian Horse Artillery. Since 1 RGR was the regional mobile reserve, it normally did not have its own specialist “enablers.” Canadian Civil-Military Cooperation (CIMIC) and Tactical Psychological Operations Teams (TPT or PSYOPS) teams were also attached. For intelligence collection and liaison purposes, the Afghan National Directorate of Security attached a number of officers. A Canadian Joint Terminal Air Controller (JTAC) from Air Command and another from the RAF Regiment (a squadron of which was protecting Kandahar Air Field) with their specialist communications gear also joined the force so 1 RGR could communicate with close air support and attack aviation resources.

operation at this particular time. One particular event on 13 February 2008 was significant. A Sperwer TUAV (Tactical Unmanned Aerial Vehicle) observed three World Food Program trucks being hijacked in broad daylight just east of Hutel. The attackers bogged one truck down attempting to escape while an RG-31 Nayala and a section from the Canadian Operational Mentor and Liaison Team (OMLT) and two platoons from 2nd Kandak in Howz-e Madad raced to respond. With a B-1B in support, and the TUAV tracking the movements of the hijackers, the OMLT and the Afghan National Army determined that police from Maywand district were responsible. This latest attack was the final straw and resulted in the replacement of all 160 police in Maywand district by the Kandahar provincial Chief of Police, General Saquib.

The unplanned wholesale replacement of the Maywand police during the operational planning process now provided a window of

opportunity to renew the district. Rather than just raiding into the remoter parts of Maywand, the RBG(S) would be able to generate synergy by facilitating a combined coalition forces-police presence and help the new police establish themselves which would be a critical step towards improving governance in the district. There was an operating theory that the district chief and the corrupt police were in cahoots regarding aid convoy shakedowns, but no action had been taken against the district chief for a variety of reasons. The removal of "his" police meant that he would lose "muscle" and therefore be more compliant. As the planning process progressed, 2nd Kandak was brought into the operation, initially at company strength. A second company was later added. Even though 2nd Kandak would be committed for a limited period, the information operations and governance benefits that could be derived from highly visible joint ANA-ANP patrolling

could be substantial, especially on the Maywand population.

The assessment of Taliban forces in Maywand suggested that the Band-e Timor strip north of the Arghandab River concealed a facilitation network plus a line of arms dumps and an intelligence node on the boundary with Zharey district. An enemy IED cell was known to operate in Ghorak district, north of the Garmabak Pass, but had sortied south previously and killed both British and Canadian troops passing through the district. The presence of static enemy fighting forces could not be confirmed. The Taliban generally moved through the area singly or in small groups, but sometimes coalesced to shoot up the Maywand district centre for info ops effect. Enemy medium value individuals (MVIs), or leadership targets, were present from time to time, most likely using the Band-e Timor area as a rat line. Significant movement of coalition forces into the district would set these pieces in

"A" Company 1 RGR moves out from Objective CHELSEA. The terrain in this photo is typical for the southern Maywand district.





LEFT – In the field the 1 RGR battalion tac headquarters has the ability to link to imagery provided by a variety of unmanned aerial vehicles, including MQ-1 Predator and MQ-9 Reaper.

BELOW LEFT – Influence operations include the use of Key Leader Engagements. In this case, a local shura in Band-e Timor sits down with Lieutenant-Colonel Jonny Bourne for a chat about local expectations and conditions.



NATO ISAF, depending what was going on elsewhere in the country, so availability had to be confirmed.

There were legal aspects that men like Lieutenant-Colonel Marc Gendron, the LEGAD (Legal Advisor) at RC(South), had to sort out. What rules of engagement were going to be used - Canadian, British, NATO? Under what conditions would they change? Who would approve those changes? What could be blown up and what couldn't?

At Task Force Kandahar, control measures between the battle groups' forces operating in neighbouring Zharey district and the RBG(S) had to be established. For example, the templated range of a 120 mm gun on a Leopard 2 A6M was in excess of four kilometers. If the tanks were firing at something to the west of Zharey, could they accidentally hit the manoeuvring units? Or, if the Van Doos used artillery on a target in Panjwayi, nobody wanted lumbering CH-47's flying through the rounds as they arced through the airspace. These are not mundane matters when millions of dollars of helicopters and several hundred priceless human lives are at stake.

One of the main issues in planning SOHIL LARAM II revolved around the early warning problem. The expansion of the cell phone network in Kandahar province since 2003 meant that any person with a cell phone was a potential sensor. The Taliban had non-insurgent insurgents (locals paid to do a specific, one-time task),

motion, either to escape or to engage, and then tactical responses by 1 RGR battlegroup would be generated accordingly. With a dispersed enemy hiding amongst the population, this was one of several ways to flush them out.

Much of the staff effort dealt with coordination and deconfliction to avoid situations like the Tarnak Farms tragedy in 2002 where four Canadian soldiers were killed by a bomb dropped by a US aircraft.

For example, at least three types of special operations forces, none of them belonging to RC(South), operated throughout the region. They possessed their own ISTAR resources and air support, and those resources had to be coordinated with ISTAR and air support assigned to RC(South). To make matters more complicated, some of these platforms were the same, ie: they worked for NATO ISAF as well as the other entities. The priority was not always

ideological sympathizers from the old days or people coerced into providing information. In effect, each district had an insurgent reporting network that was activated the moment coalition forces arrived on the scene. The network could communicate in a variety of ways. This reporting network extended from Maywand to the gates of Kandahar Air Field (and probably within the base itself). Deception, therefore, was a critical component in the plan.

When 1 RGR wargamed the operation it became clear that the presence of 100-plus vehicles on Ring Road South during the day or night would be more than enough to activate the enemy warning system. The enemy would not know exactly where the force was going, however. To get from the highway and into Band-e Timor would take time – it is over 12 kilometers with no roads. It would be enough time for the enemy to hide or disperse before the force arrived.

The obvious answer was to conduct an airmobile insertion at night to achieve surprise. There were two problems with this course of action. The first was helicopter availability and the second was the perfidious weather situation. Night airmobile operations are complicated. Throw dust into the mix and the risk level rose dramatically, as the Americans found out during the Desert One disaster in 1980.³ There were only so many helicopters and they were heavily tasked. 1 RGR generated two courses of action – a ground move and insertion, and a combination ground move and airmobile insertion.

The second course of action was the best. The ground convoys would move along Ring Road South, the enemy would activate the early warning system and watch the vehicles. As the ground force moved off the roads south towards Band-e Timor, the enemy would be fixated on its progress. Without warning the

airmobile force would emerge out of the desert from the south and surprise them. The first course of action was second best but the planners came up with a scheme to use air power to take out any enemy forces trying to escape the area.

The elongated nature of Band-e Timor posed some challenges. There were clusters of compound complexes all along the river for some 15-20 kilometers. There were irrigation systems, including a canal with fast running water moving through and between the complexes. Each compound cluster was separated by rolling but open arid terrain. The planners decided that the two companies would be inserted on either end of the Band-e Timor river zone and work towards the centre. An Artillery Manoeuvre Area (AMA) for the Canadian guns and the 1 RGR logistics echelon would be established on the Dasht in part to act as a block but also to give the artillery reach to the south.

On the way through Huteel, one platoon would be dropped off and start working with the new police, while the battalion command post would be set up in the district centre. Part of one of the companies would later be brought north to Huteel and join in operations there when the Afghan National Army arrived. If enemy forces appeared in the north near Ghorak, a contingency plan was formulated to respond to that move.

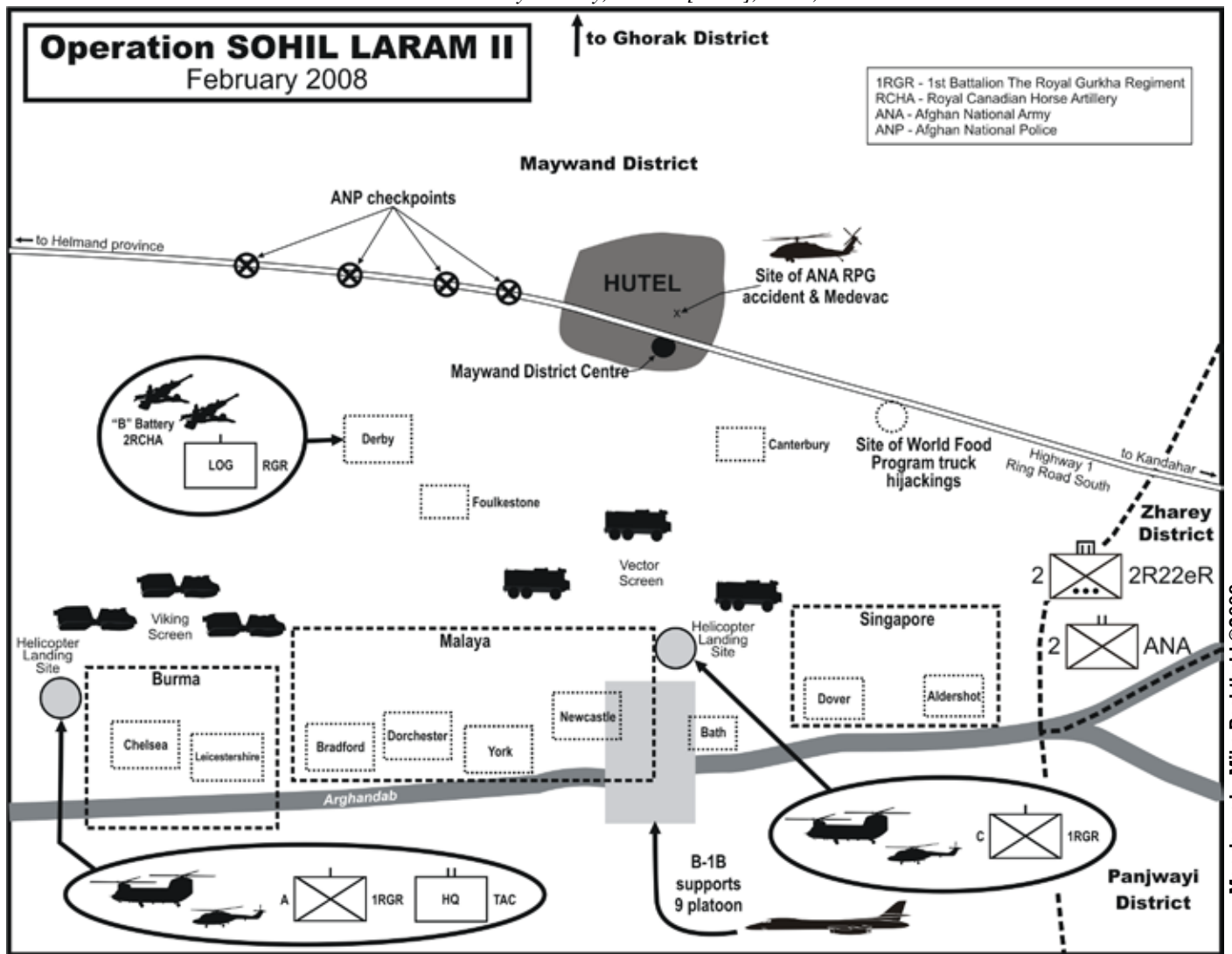
Execution: Insertion and Pursuit

During the afternoon of 20 February the weather situation was not good as the infantry companies rehearsed embarking and disembarking their helicopter chinks in an open field. A small dust event was moving into the Kandahar area and the hills that were normally visible from the airfield were obscured with dust. On the

evening of 20 February elements of 2nd Kandak moved to Camp Roberts, the 1 RGR camp on Kandahar Air Field, to link up with the Vikings and Vectors. The weather cleared enough by then and the airmobile insertion was approved. The convoys departed around midnight while the two infantry companies awoke from forced rest, prepared their equipment, and were bused to the helicopter hanger area.

At 0235 hours IFF (identification of friend or foe) control measures (glow sticks and min-beacons) were activated and attached to helmets and weapons checked. RAF ground personnel mustered the chinks in the dark as the crews of the CH-47 and Lynx helicopters prepared their aircraft. The APUs whined as they started the engines, and soon the loud whop-whop-whop of the huge blades smacked the air. The Gurkhas filed in, and when everybody was loaded, RAF Chinooks and Army Air Corps Lynx taxied into a line and lifted off the runway into a sharp banking turn that took the force into the Reg Desert. British Army Air Corps AH-64 Apache attack helicopters, already in the air, joined up to escort the force. Helicopters are loud by nature so everything possible was done to mask the noise signature and achieve surprise. In this case, the desert was empty and the enemy early warning net does not extend to the south out of the built-up areas between Kandahar and Maywand. The circuitous route also gave time for the slower convoys moving along Ring Road South to get into position. Indeed, enemy “eyes” were focused on the Vikings and Vectors as they drove towards Helmand.

With the doors open and gunners with night vision leaning out checking the ground, the temperature inside the Chinooks was near freezing for the 40 minutes it took to fly from KAF to a point south of Maywand district. The full moon bathed the desert sand so it looked like an ocean



as the helicopters surfed the ground effect at low level. At this point the force split into two and headed for their respective company helicopter landing sites (HLS). The loadies held up two fingers – two minutes to the HLS – and the Gurkhas tapped each man ahead of them with two fingers. Everybody stood up and seconds later the machines' noses lurched up to flare into the HLS. "A" Company had a rough time – its Chinooks hit the ground hard, probably because of the moon-dust-like powder that obscured the distance to the ground. There were several injuries including broken noses and twisted knees.

The Gurkhas poured out into a defensive posture as the Chinooks and Lynxs lifted off, showering the soldiers with large rocks and dust for several seconds. Once the birds were gone the company commanders

checked the surrounding area with night vision and when satisfied, started to move off in the dark towards the objective compound complexes. There was no contact at first.

"A" Company got into complex CHELSEA without incident and initiated several searches. "C" Company, on the other hand, immediately bumped into the Taliban after insertion near NEWCASTLE and BATH. 7 Platoon and 9 Platoon disembarked on the HLSs, with 7 Platoon to the north. A group of enemy in a compound complex south of 9 Platoon's HLS were spotted by an orbiting MQ-1 Predator. 7 Platoon swung into a blocking position to the west of the complex as 9 Platoon moved in, but the enemy pulled out to the south to another group of compounds. 7 Platoon moved south

in parallel and there were some shots fired. The company commander moved 9 Platoon in a leapfrog to the complex to the south of where the enemy was, but while this was in progress, the Taliban continued to move south. At this point, they could not be engaged from the air because of an ROE (rules of engagement) issue, so the pursuit continued.

The Taliban force, numbering some 17 personnel, crossed the river. 7 Platoon engaged with 7.62 mm machine gun fire when the Taliban silhouetted themselves on the skyline and then the enemy split up. One group of six struck southwest into the desert, while the remainder dodged 9 Platoon and swung north, trying to cross the river and flank them. At this point, they were engaged by a B-1B using three GBU-38 500-lb bombs. The strike, conducted around 0810

RIGHT – Close air support was used during Op SOHIL LARAM II including a successful strike by a US Air Force B-1B on a Taliban group attempting to exfiltrate the engagement area.

CENTRE RIGHT – The Viking oversnow vehicle was adapted for use in Afghanistan. Crewed by Royal Marines, this Viking troop acted as a mobile screen during cordon and search operations around Band-e Timor.

BOTTOM RIGHT – Moving along Highway 1 from the DERBY box to Hutel, the battalion tac Vector vehicles halt so the Gurkhas can conduct a defile drill to deter IED attack.

hours, was estimated to have killed four and wounded three Taliban. The survivors turned east, heading towards Zharey. 7 Platoon moved east, south of the river, and 9 Platoon moved east, while the Fire Support group manoeuvred into several blocking positions to the north. In time the pursuit turned up nothing as the enemy hid their weapons and melted away in the compound complexes near BATH.

The effects of the dance between “C” Company and the Taliban in Objectives NEWCASTLE and BATH was immediate. ISTAR resources reported that there was an enemy leadership target in the area. The combination of the Predator and the B-1B were kept on station as long as possible in case more enemy presented themselves.

Meanwhile, “A” Company’s searches continued in CHELSEA. The NDS team working with the company discovered suspect materials of what might be IED production materials of a new type, but it turned out not to be the case. Of more interest was the discovery of a modified white Toyota Corolla, a type commonly associated with SVBIED’s (suicide vehicle-borne improvised explosive device) in RC (South). Numerous papers, ID cards, and notebooks were uncovered and sent off for translation. Then ISTAR resources reported that another enemy medium value target was



located in a compound complex adjacent to CHELSEA. That made two significant enemy leaders present in Band-e Timor. "A" Company then detained an individual who was part of the Taliban early warning network. It was 0845 hours on the first day.

Execution: Influence Operations

An important aspect of operations like SOHIL LARAM II is how the manoeuvre force relates to the population. The intended effects of this relationship were built into the plan. Indeed, the deployment of the battalion CO and his tactical headquarters early in the operation in part related to influence operations. These operations essentially combined information operations and CIMIC assessments with on-the-spot assessments of the religious/political, tribal and community dynamics

while the operation was in progress with the aim of positively influencing the population. Fundamentally, there are local dynamics that cannot be captured by the broader examination of tribal dynamics or provincial political processes in southern Afghanistan. The only way to do so is through immediate close contact with the population.

The primary tool in the case of SOHIL LARAM II was the Key Leader Engagement (KLE) where 1 RGR sought out local leaders and met with them in shuras with other local elders and power brokers. Using interpreters and the accompanying NDS personnel, the meetings yielded valuable information on the attitudes of the community as well as their needs, in addition to tactical information on enemy activities. The meetings also permitted PSYOPS to disseminate their messages in subtle ways and explain to the local leaders

and people what the coalition forces were doing in the area and why. In theory, follow-on CIMIC activities and then development assistance from the Provincial Reconstruction Team would follow but in the case of a foray like SOHIL LARAM II, only assessments within the constraints of the tactical situation could be made. Development could only take place with the long term domination of the area by Afghan national security forces

1 RGR conducted numerous KLEs and shuras in the Band-e Timor communities during the course of SOHIL LARAM II. The presence of the 1 RGR CO and his tactical headquarters on the ground with "A" Company was useful. Having an older head man from the coalition meeting with the local elders facilitated dialogue in ways that were not as effective with younger men meeting with older men in certain

A pair of M-777 155 mm guns from "B" Battery, 2 Royal Canadian Horse artillery firing from the DERBY box in support of "A" Company, 1st Battalion, The Royal Gurkha Rifles.



circumstances. Respect goes a long way and it is generation-based in the Pashtun culture.

The picture that emerged after several KLEs, though generalized, was at odds with the perception that the communities were pro-Taliban and had been for several years. The message transmitted to the coalition forces was that the bulk of the population would in fact welcome an Afghan National Army presence, even ANA strong points. They were generally not supportive of the Taliban, but they had no choice because there was little or no government presence. They did not, however, want an Afghan National Police presence. The population had extremely poor relations with the ANP in Hutel, and even referred to them as “bastards.” They informed coalition personnel that they had problems getting produce to the markets in Hutel. Whether this was the result of actions by corrupt police, insurgents dressed as police, or a combination was difficult to determine, but practically all elders called for the removal of the current district leader. The people were interested in improved health care and an education system, but the attitude of “we’ll believe it when we see it” prevailed. Indeed, the CIMIC teams learned that, surprisingly, many landowners lived in Kabul and rarely visited Band-e Timor.

Note that KLE’s were not always a matter of just sitting down and drinking tea. On one occasion personnel accompanying the CO were menaced by a disheveled, crazed young man wielding a pick. He was tied to a tree by two elders

A joint Afghan National Army-Maywand District police patrol prepares to deploy into Hutel from the district centre. These patrols are crucial in establishing government presence in this volatile district.

to prevent him from interfering with the shura.

The insertion and manoeuvre of the 1 RGR battlegroup had a number of other effects on the enemy forces throughout Band-e Timor-Hutel triangle. ISTAR resources detected enemy activity consistent with a plan to screen the escape of leaders, some of whom appeared to be in Objective YORK. One enemy group or observer had “eyes on” the Canadian 155 mm gun position and Gurkha echelon located at DERBY. The CO was concerned that the enemy, though psychologically off balance, would stay put and wait out the operation, so he pressed for more manoeuvre with the intent to get the enemy moving, get him to make mistakes and make him vulnerable to strikes or capture. The low level of civilian pattern of life was surprising and was a possible indicator that the population was not interested in providing cover for enemy movement out of fear of being targeted by coalition forces.

As the day progressed, more attention was paid to the compounds in Objective YORK by ISTAR resources. It was increasingly apparent that one or more enemy

leaders were located somewhere in there. At least one was ordered by his high command in Pakistan to leave and avoid being captured at all costs. Other enemy groups in Op Boxes BURMA and MALAYA were ordered by their higher headquarters to escape while they could. “A” Company was ordered to prepare for a future tasking in that area. As ISTAR assets scoured the district, the 155 mm guns were readied and more air power was requested, just in case anything moved. The ISTAR priority remained Objective YORK.

The enemy knew there were coalition forces in CHELSEA and he could see that the cordon and searches had been extended from the compounds in CHELSEA to those in LEICESTERSHIRE. To the enemy, it looked like “A” Company was plodding its way east through the various complexes. The 1 RGR plan was to finish with LEICESTERSHIRE and then “tab” (route march) to DONCASTER, make it look like the force was bedding down to deceive observers, and then conduct a rapid night approach march along the Arghandab river and arrive at YORK at first light to search the compounds.



The Viking squadron would depart DORCHESTER just before first light to establish a screen north of YORK to catch any "leakers."

Meanwhile, the Fire Support Group snipers screening to the north of "C" Company were observing people moving about Objective DOVER but were unable to determine whether they were enemy forces. When "C" Company got into the compounds, they determined that the leadership target that had been there had slipped away, possibly headed north to Hutel. The presence of two Harrier GR-7 close support aircraft flying up and down the river appeared to have deterred any enemy movement south.

While "A" Company was laying up in DONCASTER and preparing for the night tab, ISTAR resources identified one of the leadership targets as a logistics facilitator but he was located west of DONCASTER, about a kilometer away. This target appeared to be different from the one(s) in YORK. Should the plan be altered to take him out or not? The decision was made to search for him but to carry on with YORK. Attempts were made to get an American Pathfinder Platoon from TF EAGLE ASSAULT and insert them to get him, or if that were not possible, bring in a section of US Army OH-58D Warrior recce helicopters, but the forces were not available. To the east, "C" Company reported the seizure of a small number of weapons in their areas. The locals claimed the Taliban "left yesterday." This was most likely the group engaged by the B-1B. More importantly, "C" Company reported that the locals were hostile to coalition forces the closer they were to Zharey district. Thus far, it looked like there were at least three leadership targets on the loose south of Hutel.

"A" Company's night tab and early morning entry in YORK was anti-climactic. A major KLE was held, however, late in the morning at YORK. The elders here told the

coalition forces they welcomed a ANA but not an ANP presence, that the enemy moved through the area but the locals would not let them stay in the area out of fear of coalition air strikes. It appeared as though the Taliban acquiesced to the locals without a lot of intimidation because this was the only route to resupply its forces in Zharey district and they did not want a hostile population on such vital ground. Interestingly, the local leaders explained that Taliban forces moving through their complexes spoke Punjabi, not Pashtun, and that this was a common occurrence.

There were no contacts and ISTAR resources detected no leadership target movement in that objective area, though it looked like the DONCASTER contact wanted to make his way to Helmand province to the west. "A" Company was ordered back to LEICESTERSHIRE with the Viking screen to try and hunt the DONCASTER contact.

ISTAR then reported that another leadership target that had been in YORK was on the move and was no longer in YORK. How he got out was a mystery, but clumps of newly-shaven hair were discovered near a compound he may have been hiding in, so he may have altered his appearance and departed. ISTAR resources reported yet another medium-value leader who evacuated Op Box BURMA as the Gurkhas moved towards it. Unfortunately, the resources needed to identify and engage him were not available.

Execution: Consolidation

Concurrent activity in Hutel and the surrounding area on the second day of the operation produced immediate results. The Gurkha platoon and Canadian CIMIC and PSYOPS initiated a series of joint patrols with the newly-arrived ANP and awaited engineering resources to start the reconstruction of the ANP checkpoints on Highway 4.

The joint patrols discovered that there were hard feelings towards coalition forces dating back to at least 2002 when the poppy eradication programme was initiated by the Afghan Interim Administration. At some point around 20 farmers were killed during demonstrations. The patrols immediately explained that the coalition and the Afghan security forces were not in Maywand to eradicate poppy, that they were there to improve security and hunt Taliban. This impromptu information operation countered the prevailing Taliban information ops message that the coalition presence would disenfranchise and starve the farmers and their families.

Hutel bazaar was a thriving collection of establishments, despite Taliban attempts to intimidate the populace. The latest attempt was six weeks prior when 16 policemen were executed after their checkpoint was seized west of the town. ISTAR resources discovered that there were in fact enemy present in the western part of Hutel and they had 1 RGR under observation. An enemy cell planned to place an IED on Highway 1 but the plan was thwarted by the presence of the joint patrols.

The joint patrols also turned up some significant finds on day three. Two white Toyota Corollas were discovered in a wadi concealed with a tarp. They were full of fuel and in good running order. There were no weapons found, but it was likely that these vehicles were pre-positioned so they could be quickly modified for SVBIED use or as getaway cars for enemy leadership. Indeed, ISTAR reported that there were enemy nearby but details remained vague. The vehicles were confiscated and none of the locals complained.

"C" Company continued with its operations to the south east. A sniper lay back observation post spotted two pick up trucks behaving suspiciously in the evening near the locations of the B-1B strikes. They appeared to be



Two of the ubiquitous white Toyota Corollas were seized by one of the joint patrols before they could be converted for use as suicide improvised explosive devices.

cleaning up the remains of the strike or looking for wounded, The vehicles disappeared into the desert before they could be engaged by a pair of F-16's that were on station.

"C" Company remained interested in the area, as there were indications from KLE's that the locals were annoyed with coalition operations, probably special operations forces operations, that bothered them at night. The NDS detachment confirmed from the locals that leadership targets had been moving through the area, that it was a waypoint for personnel, not weapons storage. They also developed a theory that the Taliban groups that took off during the first night were a protection party for a significant Taliban leader and their starburst actions were designed to distract the coalition forces from locating and engaging the enemy leader.

Other information developed by the NDS and various ISTAR resources confirmed that there were still leadership targets in the area between the river and Hutel and learned that there was a safe house that catered to Taliban commanders somewhere near Objectives SINGAPORE and

CANTERBURY. As there was a lack of "fidelity" on the target, 1 RGR battlegroup remained focused on securing the district centre in Hutel and working on the checkpoints before expanding the joint patrols outwards prematurely.

Then the enemy detonated an IED amidst an ANP convoy, wounding four. Incredibly, the ANP apprehended two insurgents who had other devices or components on them. They were brought to the district centre for interrogation by the ANP. Not to be outdone, "A" Company searches to the southwest uncovered IED components in a village west of DERBY. Two more prisoners were taken, both were in possession of cell phones and coughed up useful information on enemy movements in the district and the types of vehicles they were employing.

At this point, the shift of emphasis was confirmed by the CO. "C" Company would focus solely on influence operations with the ANP in and around Hutel awaiting the arrival of the ANA, while "A" Company would search and exploit any information it collected

along BURMA, MALAYA and SINGAPORE.

The plan for SOHIL LARAM II took into account the possibility that Afghan National Army forces might participate but the 2nd ANA Kandak in Zharey district was itself preparing to rotate out and it was not clear what forces would be available or for how long. Lieutenant-Colonel Shareen Shah, the CO of 2nd Kandak, determined that two companies would deploy from Howz-e Madad in Zharey to Hutel for two days. The idea was to conduct as many joint ANA-ANP patrols as possible in the area to demonstrate to the population that the ANA and new Maywand ANP were going to cooperate effectively from now on, cement the linkages procedurally between the two forces and get them used to working together.

On day four, around 0830 hours, a seeming endless stream of ANA vehicles started to arrive in Hutel – Ford Ranger pick up trucks, International 2.5-ton trucks, and even several mottled Hummers equipped with 12.7 mm machine guns. At the end of the column, several Canadian RG-31 vehicles discreetly entered the district headquarters compound. This



LEFT – Gurkha medics, under the direction of Dr. D.F. Reid, and members of the Canadian Operational Mentor and Liaison Team work to save the lives of wounded Afghan soldiers.

ABOVE – A US Army UH-60 prepares to lift off with some of the Afghan National Army casualties.

significant low-level intelligence related to Taliban activities in the area. Then the Royal Marines bagged a “leaker” from one of the searches, who was identified as Taliban. This individual gave up a relative and the NDS identified both as local Taliban leaders. They were passed on to Huteel for exploitation with the hope they would give up more elements of the facilitation network. The NDS exploited several document and laptop finds and found lists of enemy personnel, and a list of judges that had been paid off by the Taliban to release captured insurgents. Other documentation detailed links to support areas in Pakistan. There was so much material it had to be transported elsewhere for exploitation. The hunt continued.

Canadian CIMIC and PSYOPS teams accompanied the joint Gurkha-ANSF patrols throughout Huteel. The picture they developed, confirmed by ISTAR, was at odds with previous assessments. Only the northwest quadrant of Huteel was seriously pro-Taliban. For the most part, 75 percent or more of the population was supportive of the government. As before, they were intimidated by

was the 12-man Operational Mentor and Liaison Team (OMLT) led by Major Corey Frederickson from 3rd Battalion Princess Patricia’s Canadian Light Infantry, who mentored elements of 2nd Kandak. The stream of vehicles continued for some time and the entire population turned out to watch. These ANA soldiers, unlike their predecessors from two years ago, wore helmets, body armour, chest rigs and carried themselves with some professionalism. The ANP were visibly envious. The PSYOPS team working the crowds detected a feeling that approximated to “the cavalry has arrived.” It was evident from conversations with the

people that they were surprised and even proud that the ANA was in Huteel. This psychological effect was identified and exploited as soon as possible. Lieutenant-Colonel Shah immediately linked up with the Huteel ANP and launched a series of foot and vehicle patrols throughout the area with the police and with “C” Company.

While the Afghan national security force (ANSF) saturation of Huteel and environs was underway, “A” Company continued its movements to the south west near DERBY and around LEICESTERSHIRE and CHELSEA. Using the Vikings squadron as a screen, “A” Company collected

the previous Maywand police forces and tended to sit on the fence. Indeed, the local clinic sold medical supplies to the Taliban to keep them away.

7 Platoon deployed west along Highway 1 with engineers and ANP and continued to refurbish the checkpoint system. The Gurkhas conducted a series of clearance patrols and vehicle checkpoints to clear each site to facilitate construction. ISTAR reportage also identified possible enemy leaders in a compound complex south of the district centre, so Lieutenant-Colonel Shah deployed two of his platoons, accompanied by Gurkhas and Canadians, to conduct searches.

ISTAR reportage continued throughout the evening. First there was a threat warning of possible IED placement west of the district centre on the highway. This IED attack was to be accompanied by an ambush. ANSF foot patrols flooded into the areas and successfully deterred this attack. The device was found and blown up, which really annoyed the local Taliban cell leader. Further reportage indicated that an enemy medium value leadership target was present somewhere in the compounds east of the district centre.

While night was falling "C" Company developed an outline plan to go after him. The problem was the complexity of this particular built-up area, which amounted to a rabbit warren of compounds, alleys, walled cultivated areas and streams. It would be difficult to seal off the area, this would require the whole battalion, but the close proximity to the district centre weighed in favour of an audacious move. A platoon from "C" Company went in trying to

get as close as possible to the enemy leader. A chase ensued, doors were kicked in, and some rounds fired. Unfortunately, the target escaped.

The next morning, a Gurkha patrol with Canadian CIMIC and PSYOPS personnel went back into this community to conduct effects mitigation. The patrol offered compensation to house owners who had property damaged during the pursuit. Interestingly, nearly every citizen had doors kicked in and all demanded compensation. Despite some hard feelings, the patrol assessed that this community was still pro-government and were not knowingly hiding the enemy leader. It appeared that a non-governmental organization that had an office in this community was assisting this individual move around and hide.

The day 2nd Kandak was scheduled to re-deploy back to Zharey was wrought with tragedy. An ANA soldier had a negligent discharge with an RPG launcher inside a concrete room which essentially shredded the lower extremities of eight Afghan soldiers. Gurkha medics led by Dr. D.F Reid rushed to the site while the Canadian OMLT soldiers worked to stabilize the wounded. A

US Army UH-60 and a USAF HH-60 flew in to evacuate the wounded. Unfortunately, seven of the eight stricken Afghans eventually died of their wounds. ISTAR determined that the enemy had "eyes on" the whole process and steps were taken to deter their planned actions against the MEDEVAC helicopters.

The Taliban immediately exploited this event for information operations purposes and spread the word throughout Huteel that they had attacked the ANA and caused the casualties. The situation was complicated by the fact that 2nd Kandak was leaving. This could become an information ops victory for the Taliban if they could portray the scheduled withdrawal as a response to the casualties they supposedly inflicted and thus reduce the positive effects generated by the joint ANSF patrolling. The Canadian PSYOPS and CIMIC operators deployed with Gurkha and ANP patrols to counter the enemy message during the course of the next day. Surprisingly, the teams learned that local people, some of them four kilometres from Huteel, already knew that the blast was an accident and was not Taliban action.

During a night raid in Huteel, private property was damaged. A Canadian PSYOPS/CIMIC team accompanied by a Gurkha patrol conducts compensation activities with the local population.



One of the other enemy medium value leadership targets was moving between NEWCASTLE and a position south of the district centre. There was some concern that he might collect fighters and, emboldened by the RPG tragedy, mount a night attack against the district centre to profit from the situation and enhance the Taliban's stature with both the Taliban-supportive population and to intimidate the pro-government population. The attack failed to materialize for unknown reasons. Other cells to the west of the district centre, thwarted in their activities and frustrated, were trying to bring RPGs and another IED into the area to ambush coalition vehicles traveling down Highway 1. Foot patrols sent into the area coupled with the low level pass of a pair of Mirage 2000 fighters deterred this activity.

ISTAR reportage indicated that one of the enemy leaders had made his way to Helmand province, while another was trying to get out of the area south east of the district centre. Op SOHIL LARAM II was winding down and the resources to conduct a detailed search for this individual were not available, but it was clear that the raid to the east of the district centre looking for the third leader unsettled the enemy that remained in the Hutel area. In effect, they ordered their people to go to ground, stop communicating, and cease operations.

Resolution

After seven days of operations in Maywand district, Task Force TIGER re-deployed to Kandahar Air Field and made its preparations to depart Afghanistan and return to its home station in Brunei. The Canadian CIMIC and PSYOPS teams were sent back to Maywand almost immediately once RC (South) and TF Kandahar assessed the situation and realized that an opportunity

presented itself. Sufficient forces were not available for a complete occupation of the district, but creative ways to maintain the momentum generated by Op SOHIL LARAM II were explored and implemented in March 2008.

As with any operation in Afghanistan, determining specific long or short term effects is no easy task. One of the most important was the relative lack of enemy action directed at the relief in place of the Canadian battlegroup in Zharey and Panjwayi districts, short of some IED activity. When the enemy did attempt to engage Canadian forces in western Zharey/Panjwayi he lacked the ammunition to do so effectively and even complained about that fact. Similarly, there was almost no ambush or IED activity directed against forces travelling along Highway 1 between Helmand and Kandahar for some weeks. Again determining exactly why this was the case is open to some interpretation, but a tentative conclusion can be made with some confidence.

Substantial information on the Taliban's structure in Maywand district was collected during the course of the operation. There was also increased confidence demonstrated by the Afghan police and army outwards towards the population and internally between the two organizations. Taken together, this provided any follow on force or security measures a solid base for future action. Demonstrating to the enemy that Maywand was no longer a safe haven or a seam though ambiguous on the surface, has the potential to contribute positively towards a pro-government orientation later on as well.

Finally Operation SOHIL LARAM II forced several enemy commanders to scatter from what they viewed as a comfortable no-go zone. This in turn made them vulnerable to other coalition action and at the same time

disrupted whatever plans they were working on at the time.

Operation SOHIL LARAM II confirmed that the possession of an operational manoeuvre capacity by Regional Command (South), when wielded properly, could generate positive operational as well as tactical effects in the complex environment of southern Afghanistan in the face of an insurgent enemy. To commemorate the new link forged between the Canadian army and the Gurkhas, 1 RGR was awarded the Canadian Forces Unit Commendation in May 2008:

For outstanding elan and exemplary combat skills that directly contributed to the overall success of Task Force Kandahar during Operation ATHENA, Afghanistan, Sep 07 to Mar 08.

Notes

A Note on Sources – The author observed the operational planning process for SOHIL LARAM II at Regional Command (South), Task Force Kandahar, and 1 RGR battlegroup and then accompanied the Gurkha battalion into the field for the duration of the operation. Certain control measures have been altered and intelligence sources blurred for operational security considerations.

1. The Helmand-deployed 1 RGR company occupied a forward operating base near Garmsir. Not coincidentally, the Joint Terminal Air Controller assigned to that company was a certain "Captain Harry Wales," better known as Prince Harry.
2. The TLAV is a dramatically re-engineered M-113A3 APC.
3. This was the failed US operation to rescue the American hostages held in Iran in April 1980. The mission was aborted with the loss of eight US lives, seven RH-53D helicopters and a C-130 transport aircraft. One of the main contributing factors to the disaster was an unexpected dust storm in the Iranian desert.

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