# Insurgent Tactics in Southern Afghanistan

2005-2008

Jerry Meyerle
Carter Malkasian

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Dr. Eric Thompson
Acting Research Team Leader
Stability and Development Program

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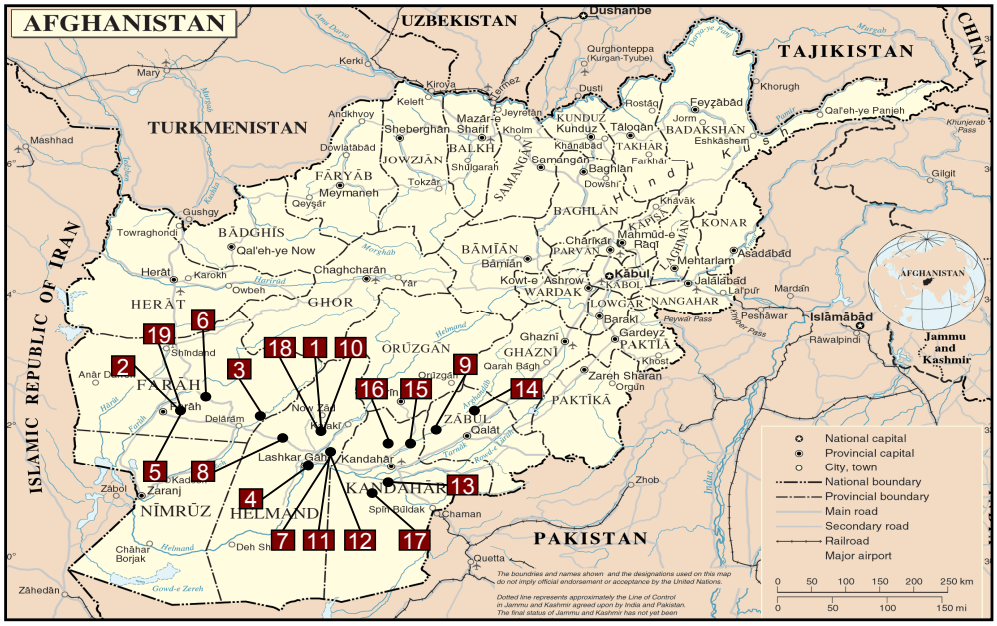
This short book provides an up-to-date introduction to the tactics employed by insurgents in southern Afghanistan during the years 2005-2008. It includes vignettes and maps on 19 different tactically significant engagements. The book covers three types of attacks: ambushes, attacks on fixed positions, and defensive engagements. The intended audience is Marines and soldiers going into theatre.

This study would not have been possible without the generous help of soldiers, sailors, and Marines from the US and UK militaries, who sat with the authors for many hours going over the details of past engagements in great detail. Any inaccuracies are the fault of the authors.

The structure of this publication is based on the book *The Other Side of the Mountain* by Ali Ahmad Jalali and Lester W. Grau, which describes the tactics of the Afghan Mujahideen during their war against the USSR during the 1980s.

The Marine Corps Intelligence Activity sponsored this research.

# Vignette Locations

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# INTRODUCTION

Afghan insurgents can be brave and tenacious, with a gift for small unit tactics. They have frequently engaged US and NATO forces directly, often for long periods, and made effective use of fire and maneuver, including flanking and encirclement. At times, they have pinned down patrols and closed in for the kill. They have launched hundreds of attacks on fortified bases and raised the costs of maintaining these positions by targeting Coalition supply lines with IEDs and ambushes.

When attacked, Afghan insurgents often counterattack, and maintain contact even when faced with vastly superior firepower. On many occasions, they have fought through air strikes and intense artillery bombardment. Taliban fighters protecting high-level commanders have been known to stand their ground in the face of certain death. They almost never surrender.

The insurgency in Afghanistan is mainly rural. The Taliban's bases are in the country's many far-flung villages and remote valleys where there is little or no government presence. As a result, Coalition forces have spread themselves out over vast areas with long and vulnerable lines of communication. Isolated bases operate far from reinforcements, the surrounding area often controlled by the Taliban. The insurgents have relentlessly targeted the roads, sometimes cutting off Coalition bases. Lines of communication are particularly hard to protect in Afghanistan with its difficult geography, poor transportation infrastructure, and dispersed, rural population.

The Taliban's tactics vary substantially from place to place, depending on geography, demographics, and the density of Coalition forces. The fighting in the austere mountains of northern Kandahar and Zabul is different from the fighting in the lush and heavily cultivated valleys along the Helmand River and Kandahar's southern suburbs. Some villages have been the sites of repeated ambushes; others have remained quiet. In the cities, suicide bombings are more common, but in the rural areas traditional guerrilla tactics are the norm. Insurgents continue to carry out large-scale massed attacks where the Coalition's presence is thin, while elsewhere they have become more cautious. There are also many separate insurgent groups in different parts of Afghanistan, most (but not all) of which fight under the banner of the Taliban. For simplicity's sake, this study will use the terms "Taliban" and "insurgents" interchangeably.

Tactics have changed over the course of the war. From 2002 through most of 2005, the Taliban operated in small groups in remote areas and carried out hit-and-run attacks on isolated patrols. As the Taliban went on the offensive in late 2005 and 2006, they massed in large numbers near population centers and launched frontal assaults on heavily fortified positions. After taking heavy casualties and failing to push the Coalition back, many insurgent commanders dispersed their forces and focused on smaller operations. The years 2007 and 2008 also saw a dramatic rise in the number and sophistication of IEDs and suicide attacks.

The purpose of this study is to describe and analyze small unit tactics employed by insurgents in southern Afghanistan since 2005. The intended audience is soldiers and Marines deployed or getting read to deploy to Afghanistan. The idea is to provide Marines with an accessible yet analytically precise introduction to the infantry tactics of Afghan insurgents.

The remainder of this introduction is a general discussion of various tactics, with reference to specific examples. The three main chapters include vignettes on different direct fire engagements. The incidents described in Chapter 1 are ambushes, those in Chapter 2 are attacks on fixed positions, and in Chapter 3 defensive engagements. The conclusion discusses potential countermeasures.

Each vignette includes a detailed description of what happened, a conclusion analyzing the insurgents' tactics, and a full-color map. The vignettes cover a variety of direct fire engagements across the south: five in Farah province in the southwest, eight on Helmand, four in Kandahar, and two in Zabul. Afghanistan's varying geography is represented as well – remote mountains, lush or heavily cultivated terrain, and urban areas. Units involved in these engagements include Afghan army and police, their US trainers, and soldiers and Marines from the American, British, and Canadian militaries. The incidents covered are evenly spread over the years 2005-2008: four occurred in 2005, four in 2006, three in 2007, and five in 2008.

The authors chose this methodology after concluding that it was impossible to adequately examine insurgent tactics without first describing them in detail. This in turn required reconstructing individual battles, so as to precisely identify what tactics the insurgents employed.

The vignettes (with maps) are also designed to be used as teaching tools; they are written like storyboards, so that Marines may go through every step of each engagement and think about how best to react. These vignettes required extensive primary source research, mainly interviews with participants in the US and the UK. The authors, who have deployed with US forces in Afghanistan, also consulted numerous books and articles about Afghan insurgent tactics against the Russian and British militaries in past conflicts.

**Afghan tactics in the 1980s**

Insurgent tactics in Afghanistan have not changed considerably since the war against the Soviets during the 1980s. The one clear exception is the use of suicide bombing, which was unheard of in Afghanistan before 2002. The Afghan Mujahideen used IEDs (usually mines detonated by command-wire or remote-control) against convoys and foot patrols, though on a smaller scale than today. Some of the IED technology has changed since the 1980s, but the basic tactics are not very different.

Ambush tactics in particular have remained constant. Flanking, encirclement, the L-shaped ambush – all were perfected during the 1980s. Over the course of the war, the Mujahideen became adept at the hit-and-run ambush. It was during the 1980s that Afghan

insurgents learned to mitigate the effects of airpower by using fortifications and by dispersing their forces. The Mujahideen occasionally destroyed entire convoys. Long ambushes stretching out over several kilometers were common during the 1980s, especially in the mountains. The Mujahideen set up ambush positions at night and moved around unarmed during the day. They also exploded mines against convoys and foot patrols. The Mujahideen relentlessly targeted the Soviet army's stretched-out supply lines. The USSR fought hard to secure the roads, but never succeeded.

The Mujahideen constantly targeted fixed Soviet positions; many were overrun. More than 75 percent of Soviet forces in Afghanistan were tied down protecting their own positions and keeping them resupplied. During the 1980s, the Mujahideen learned to attack positions at night, to hit nearby positions as a means to delay reinforcements, and to fight in small groups in order to avoid mass casualties. The Mujahideen regularly over-ran remote district centers, fled, and then reoccupied them when Soviet forces left. The Soviet army controlled its bases, many government buildings, and most urban areas. But the Mujahideen had greater influence among Afghanistan's mainly rural population, which lives in thousands of far-flung, self-governing villages.

Insurgents also occasionally stood their ground in defensive engagements. The Mujahideen preferred low-risk, highly mobile hit-and-run attacks to holding ground. There were, however, many occasions where insurgents stood and fought against Soviet offensives – usually to protect important base areas needed to move supplies, treat wounded fighters, and plan operations. Insurgents learned to build defensive fortifications and ambush sites surrounding key bases, fight off air assaults, and use sentries and informers to watch Soviet forces. Ambushes near bases bought time for the Mujahideen to prepare their defenses, hide weapons, and flee the area. When the insurgents attempted to hold a base area, they usually took heavy casualties. They learned over time to operate smaller, more mobile bases, and to abandon these positions rather than attempt to defend them.

**Ambushes**

Ambushes have been a staple of Afghan insurgent tactics since the war against the Soviets in the 1980s. Afghanistan is a sparsely populated country with poor roads. The Coalition's long, stretched out lines of communication present an easy target. Since 2001, the Taliban has employed a wide variety of ambush tactics against mounted and dismounted patrols, in barren mountains and lush valleys. Most ambushes were hit-and-run, lasting less than 30 minutes. Yet, many lasted for hours.

Insurgents have used scouts to observe the movement of Coalition forces. Forward observers often reported all details of a convoy, such as the number and types of vehicles, the presence of tactical air controllers, whether the convoy was carrying artillery, and so forth. For example, insurgents lying in wait in the Gulistan valley in Farah in 2007 appeared to know that air support was unlikely, giving them ample time to maneuver on their target. The insurgents also knew the route the convoy would take and when it would arrive [see Vignette 3].

Insurgents have kept patrols in Helmand under constant observation. As a result, it was nearly impossible for British forces to exploit the element of surprise. In many areas of Helmand in 2006, it was an accepted fact that if a patrol stayed more than ten minutes in any one place, it would be ambushed. IED cells in the cultivated areas of the Helmand River valley relied heavily on forward observers, who tracked the movement of British foot patrols and gave the signal to detonate [see Vignette 7]. The Taliban have also kept airfields under watch; insurgents often knew whether air support was on its way and how long it would take to arrive. As early as 2005, forward observers near Kandahar Airfield took note of all aircraft taking off and landing.

The Taliban tended to warn civilians before carrying out ambushes near populated areas. Departing civilians or an empty village or market usually indicated an impending attack, sometimes followed by men of fighting age arriving in pickup trucks and motorcycles [see Vignette 2]. This was less frequent in the cities where the Taliban had less support and there were more informers, but was not unheard of. In Kandahar city in 2008, insurgents warned nearby civilians the night before attacking the Sarpoza Prison, yet word did not reach the police or Canadian forces [see Vignette 13]. Drug traffickers, concerned more with protecting lucrative trafficking routes than securing popular support, tended to have fewer qualms about harming civilians.

Most ambushes began with a volley of RPGs, followed by small arms fire. In most attacks, the insurgents broke contact before air support arrived (though in a minority of cases, they fought through airstrikes). Casualties, if any, were usually inflicted during the first few minutes of fighting. In most incidents, each insurgent knew his role and escape route; all details were worked out ahead of time to reduce the need to communicate before or during the fighting. The signal to open fire was usually an RPG fired by the leader of the group.

As the Taliban came under increasing pressure in 2007 and 2008, they turned increasingly to IEDs. When using IEDs in an ambush, the Taliban triggered the device, then launched a volley of RPGs, and withdrew under the cover of small arms fire. This was a standard tactic for IED cells operating in the Helmand River valley [see Vignette 7]. It was also common in the mountains of northern Kandahar [see Vignette 16].

An often-used IED tactic was for unarmed forward observers (“dickers” in British parlance) to signal the triggerman, who was hiding out of sight, to detonate the IED. In Sangin, there were instances of sophisticated daisy-chained IEDs dug into mud walls at waist height and targeted against foot patrols. Most IED attacks on British troops were against foot patrols. Some IEDs were detonated via long wires running over 100 meters through buildings and across fields to a triggerman well out of sight.

Afghan insurgents frequently maneuvered to flank or encircle Coalition forces, usually under cover fire. They also moved position after coming under fire. When fighting for longer than ten to 15 minutes, the Taliban tended to employ at least some fire and maneuver. Many demonstrated a sound understanding of basic infantry tactics. During a prolonged ambush in Shewan village in Farah province in 2007, insurgents flanked a

large US and Afghan patrol under cover from machine guns located in a group of fortified compounds [see Vignette 2]. Afghan insurgents also made frequent use of L-shaped ambushes, involving two lines of firing positions – one in front and one on the flank [see Vignette 4].

There have been cases of enemy fighters pursuing convoys after an ambush. In Farah's Gulistan valley in 2007, insurgents pursued a retreating convoy of US and Afghan soldiers, surrounded them in a culvert, and inflicted heavy casualties. In Shewan in 2008, enemy fighters ambushed a convoy of US Marines, pursued the fleeing convoy for several kilometers, and surrounded it as it regrouped outside the town [see Vignette 5]. After a US Marine platoon raided an insurgent IED factory north of Now Zad in 2008, insurgents ambushed the patrol numerous times as it drove back to base [see Vignette 18]. After ambushing a squad of Marines in Shewan in July 2008, insurgents pursued the retreating convoy for 1.5 kilometers, and surrounded it as at a police checkpoint [see Vignette 5].

The "bait and ambush" was a common tactic. Insurgents would fire at a patrol, then flee, luring Coalition forces into a pre-set ambush. In Daulatabad in Farah province in 2008, a handful of insurgents fired on a Marine convoy then fled south into some fields. The Marines got out of their vehicles and gave chase. They were then hit with a devastating close ambush from both sides [see Vignette 6]. In the town of Shewan that same year, insurgents fired on a platoon of Marines, then fled west towards a trenchline full of enemy fighters. The patrol followed, and was pinned down by heavy fire [see Vignette 19]. In Gulistan in 2007, insurgents overran the district center in order to lure a quick-reaction force into the remote valley. Insurgents then launched a devastating ambush [see Vignette 3].

In some engagements, the Taliban used sleeper firing positions, often on the flank; one group of fighters would open fire, luring forces into the kill zone of another group lying in wait [see Vignette 16]. In Farah province in 2007, a large group of insurgents played dead and held their fire after airstrikes, and then opened fire on a group of Afghan soldiers who had moved out into the open [see Vignette 3].

On occasion, Afghan insurgents have carried out near-catastrophic ambushes, often battles lasting several hours. In May 2006, the Taliban nearly destroyed a convoy near the Kajaki dam in Helmand. The insurgents isolated and surrounded elements of the convoy, while taking few casualties. The next month, several hundred well-trained insurgents surrounded and nearly wiped out a group of US Special Forces 12 miles southwest of Kandahar city. In October 2007, insurgents ambushed and then encircled and closed on a joint US-Afghan convoy moving down the Gulistan valley in Farah province [see Vignette 3].

Some of the most devastating ambushes were stretched out over several kilometers. Insurgents fought from numerous concealed and sometimes fortified positions – on the sides of mountains or in irrigated fields and orchards. The Taliban took few casualties in these attacks, in part because their positions were too spread out to target effectively. A

near-catastrophic ambush near Helmand's Kajaki dam in May 2006 stretched for over six miles. An ambush in the Gulistan valley of Farah extended over 30 kilometers [see Vignette 3]. In northern Kandahar in July 2007, insurgents ambushed a joint US-Afghan convoy along a two-mile stretch of rolling terrain; as the convoy crested each hill, it was hit by a fresh ambush.

In some ambushes, insurgents succeeded in trapping a mounted convoy in a narrow chokepoint by disabling the front and rear vehicles. This tactic was common during the 1980s, especially against cumbersome armored convoys moving along stretches of road where it was very difficult to turn around. For example, in Shewan in July 2008, insurgents disabled the front and rear vehicles of a US Marine convoy passing through a part of town with buildings close on both sides and ditches on each side of the road. The convoy was trapped in the kill zone for almost 20 minutes. Once under heavy fire, the Marines were not able to dismount and maneuver on the enemy [see Vignette 5].

When targeting mounted convoys, Afghan insurgents have occasionally demonstrated a sophisticated understanding of the vulnerabilities of armored vehicles. They often fire volleys of 3-5 RPGs, knowing that by doing so they are more likely to penetrate a vehicle's armor. In Shewan in July 2008, insurgents fired volleys of armor-piercing RPGs at very close range, penetrating the armor of a US Marine MRAP and Humvee, disabling both [see Vignette 5]. In the same town a month later, insurgents fired volleys of RPGs at the relatively less protected hoods of US Humvees, setting one of them on fire [see Vignette 19].

In Helmand, insurgents persistently targeted foot patrols in snap ambushes carried out by small groups of no more than ten fighters – usually divided into a support-by-fire element and an assault group. Ambushes began with a volley of RPGs, followed by small arms fire from multiple directions as the insurgents fell back or moved position [see Vignette 7]. These attacks tended to last less than 20 minutes. Most casualties occurred during the first few minutes of fighting.

In the cultivated areas south of Sangin, there were frequent ambushes from less than 20 yards [see Vignette 7]. Most of these occurred in certain areas; there were lines past which a patrol would almost certainly be attacked. The Taliban often used the same ambush sites over and over, especially if the ambushes were successful. It was rare for insurgents to fight in places not of their choosing. When ambushing foot patrols in particular, the Taliban preferred to launch ambushes near the end of an operation when soldiers were tired and returning to base. Insurgents also stepped up attacks during a changeover between units – in part to test the new forces and probe their vulnerabilities.

It was not uncommon for elders in Taliban-controlled villages to agree to a shura as a means to lure Coalition forces into a pre-set ambush. For example, in 2006, British troops arrived at a pre-arranged shura in a village near Kajaki dam only to find the elders and other civilians gone. Insurgents attacked the patrol from houses in the village. In Farah province in 2007, elders in the town of Shewan in Bala Baluk district agreed to a shura with Afghan soldiers and their US trainers. The elders who set up the shura failed to

show. Several hundred insurgents then opened fire from a complex of fortified buildings overlooking the site of the proposed shura [see Vignette 2].

The Taliban tended to break contact when air support arrived – not because airstrikes inflicted heavy casualties, but because air attacks made it too dangerous to continue fighting. In heavily cultivated areas, insurgents tended to disperse and flee at the sight of aircraft – particularly small attack helicopters [see Vignette 4]. Attack helicopters often laid down accurate enough fire to inflict casualties on the Taliban, but most insurgents escaped unscathed. When conducting ambushes in the cultivated areas of Helmand, the insurgents tended to split up into small groups and remain mobile, rendering most air and artillery fire ineffective. They also took cover in local homes, putting civilians at risk.

Insurgents occasionally fought through repeated airstrikes. During a battle in Shewan village of Farah province in 2007, insurgents ensconced in a set of fortified compounds kept firing through repeated bombings [see Vignette 2]. They did so again during another battle in the same village in 2008. Insurgents frequently took cover from airstrikes by hiding in tunnels, bunkers, behind rocks, or inside fortified compounds. It was not uncommon for insurgents to retreat into bunkers during airstrikes, then reemerge and continue fighting.

Most ambush positions were carefully placed to facilitate a quick retreat [see Vignette 16]. Fields, irrigation ditches, bunkers, and small compounds provided cover for insurgents to escape unnoticed from the air or to wait out bombardment [see Vignette 17]. In populated areas, insurgents often hid their weapons, mingled with civilians, and waited until nightfall to retrieve their arms. The insurgents rarely took serious casualties in hit-and-run ambushes. Their command-and-control often broke down when US or British forces struck from multiple directions and closed. Yet, Taliban fighters were rarely cornered.

In addition to targeting road convoys, the Taliban regularly ambushed British helicopters as they attempted to land or take off. Insurgents surrounded HLZs with firing positions and laid down heavy volumes of small arms fire and RPGs from concealed positions, particularly in built-up areas controlled by the Taliban – a tactic that the Mujahideen employed regularly during the 1980s. Numerous helicopters were damaged while landing or taking off. On a number of occasions, intense RPG and heavy machine gun fire forced Coalition helicopters to withdraw or land further away during an air assault, giving the insurgents more stand-off distance and time to get away [see Vignette 14].

Through repeated ambushes, insurgents disrupted Coalition supply lines, prevented or delayed reinforcements, and demonstrated control over major roads. In Helmand, the Taliban ran their own checkpoints in remote areas running up to Sangin and Kajaki, and relentlessly targeted Afghan truckers carrying supplies to British and Afghan troops. The Taliban had *de facto* control over many roads through Helmand in 2006, particularly the route between Musa Qala and Sangin. Many patrol bases in Helmand depended entirely on aerial resupply, even though the province had a relatively well-developed road network. The problem was so bad that many British patrol bases ran low on supplies and

ammunition. By targeting Coalition supply lines, the Taliban raised the costs of maintaining far-flung patrol bases. Many were closed down due to resupply problems.

**Attacks on fixed positions**

Afghan insurgents targeted numerous fortified positions – sometimes in frontal attacks involving hundreds of fighters, other times using small assault groups. They also surrounded bases with IEDs and relentlessly targeted supply convoys and helicopters in order to cut off outlying bases from supplies and reinforcements. Afghanistan's many remote patrol bases remain vulnerable to massed attacks, and present daunting logistical challenges.

Insurgents launched many direct assaults on Coalition positions. Some of these operations were probing attacks, others full-on attempts to overrun a fortified position. In Helmand in 2006, the Taliban launched numerous "human wave attacks", which involved large numbers of insurgents, usually poorly trained recruits, rushing towards the perimeter in a full-frontal assault covered by heavy weapons fire. In July 2006, some 300 insurgents assaulted the Musa Qala garrison from all sides. They fought for nearly 90 minutes before air support arrived, and then broke contact only gradually. The Taliban took heavy casualties in these operations, and later abandoned the tactic. In 2007 and 2008, the Taliban relied more on small assault groups, which crept in on British bases from multiple directions covered by heavy machine gun and RPG fire [see Vignette 11]. These assault groups occasionally fought through airstrikes.

In Zabul's mountainous Chalekor valley in 2006, insurgents nearly breached the perimeter of a US fire-base in a large-scale attack involving more than 100 fighters. The Chalekor attack also occurred shortly before dusk, so that by the time air support arrived it was dark [see Vignette 9]. In Afghanistan's eastern province of Kunar in 2008, insurgents successfully over-ran a remote US outpost in the mountains near the village of Wanat. The Wanat attack was an exception; very few bases have come close to being overrun. The incident, however, demonstrated that some Coalition bases were vulnerable to catastrophic massed assaults.

When assaulting a fixed position, the Taliban often attacked nearby checkpoints and bases to pin down quick-reaction forces. During the 2008 Sarpoza prison break, several teams of insurgents fired on nearby police checkpoints while the rest of the force assaulted the prison. Pinned down in their positions, the police did not respond to the jailbreak [see Vignette 13]. The Taliban also laid IEDs and ambushes on roads in order to delay the arrival of reinforcements [see Vignette 9].

On several occasions, insurgents carved out a no-man's land surrounding Coalition bases. The Taliban evacuated civilians from the area and set up fortifications and firing positions in houses and mosques. During the summer of 2006, insurgents created a 500-meter deep ring around the British patrol base in Musa Qala, and set up well-concealed firing positions in the many alleyways and houses within range of the base's perimeter. In Now Zad, the Taliban carved a no-man's land one kilometer deep; they used narrow alleyways to creep within 50 meters of the base's walls on a regular basis.

The most devastating attacks on fixed positions were against police posts, which insurgents targeted with impunity – especially isolated positions that sat astride major insurgent or narcotics smuggling corridors. The Taliban tended to be far more aggressive when attacking Afghan positions, especially police checkpoints, because they were so poorly defended. Many were also far from possible reinforcements. Most police checkpoints had little effect on the movement of insurgents and drug traffickers. Police personnel in isolated positions existed at the whim of the Taliban.

The Taliban repeatedly over-ran remote district centers, held them for a short time, and then fled before reinforcements arrived. In Farah province in October 2007, insurgents over-ran three district centers simultaneously. They killed a number of police and district officials, burned down the district centers, and then fled. When Coalition troops re-occupied these district centers, insurgents waited for the soldiers to leave, and then attacked again [see Vignette 3]. The Taliban carried out these attacks in part to threaten local officials and demonstrate control over outlying areas. They also attacked remote district centers to divert Coalition forces away from more important locations.

In Helmand, insurgents relentlessly targeted certain patrol bases in order to fix soldiers in their positions and prevent them from patrolling outside. Insurgents kept British patrol bases under constant fire; attacks came several times a day. For example, in Sangin in 2008, British troops set up a patrol base south of the town as a means to disrupt insurgent movement through the area. The Taliban attacked the base constantly and surrounded it with IEDs, fixing British troops inside, while continuing to move through the area. When insurgents or drug traffickers moved large shipments of opium or weapons, they bombarded the base with small arms fire to pin down its forces [see Vignette 12]. Throughout Helmand, the British struggled to hold their positions and keep them resupplied, leaving few additional assets for patrolling or offensive maneuver operations. In many cases, the Taliban controlled the immediate area surrounding these bases.

The Taliban often laid IEDs around Coalition bases, especially along roads leading to these positions. The insurgents adopted this tactic in 2008, after losing many fighters in direct assaults on Coalition bases in 2006 and 2007. In the Gumbad valley of northern Kandahar in 2006, the local Taliban laid numerous IEDs along the only road leading to the Gumbad patrol base, ultimately forcing Canadian forces to abandon the position [see Vignette 16]. In the lush green zone south of Sangin in 2008, insurgents surrounded a British patrol base with IEDs littered along numerous footpaths. The platoon-sized position was only about two kilometers from its company headquarters at the district center. Yet, casualties from IED attacks on foot patrols moving between the two positions were so high that British forces eventually closed the base [see Vignette 12].

**Defensive engagements**

Like any army, the Taliban has relied on base areas to store weapons, provide medical care to wounded fighters, plan new attacks, and serve as launching pads for operations further afield. Insurgents frequently tried to defend these bases, and, when overrun, to make holding them prohibitively costly for the Coalition. When surrounded, Afghan

insurgents tended to escape using maneuver, cover-fire, and various terrain features to their advantage. While protecting high-level commanders, they frequently stood and fought, even against impossible odds.

The Taliban posted sentries near important base areas and used an elaborate system of forward observers to keep tabs on the movement of Coalition forces. In Now Zad, the Taliban kept fighters in permanent watch positions around their bases, and ambushed any force that came near [see Vignette 1]. It was rare for US or NATO troops to attack an insurgent base area without the insurgents knowing beforehand. The Taliban operated mobile as well as static base areas, and kept their weapons in numerous hidden caches. When assaulted by a large, heavily armed force, they tended to melt away well ahead of time – particularly in the mountains – and return later after Coalition forces withdrew.

When protecting high-level commanders, Taliban fighters often held ground and fought to the death in order buy time for their leaders to escape. In Zabul province in 2005, US paratroopers fought a fierce battle with over 70 insurgents, nearly all of whom stood their ground through repeated airstrikes and assaults by a reinforced company of US troops. The paratroopers later learned that several high-level Taliban commanders escaped down the river during the fighting [see Vignette 14].

The Taliban used Afghanistan's varying terrain to their advantage when defending against Coalition offensives. In the mountainous Gumbad valley of northern Kandahar, insurgents fought from behind piles of rocks on a mountain face, fled through irrigation ducts designed to channel snowmelt, and disappeared over the ridgeline into a nearby mountain range totally inaccessible to Coalition forces except by air [see Vignette 16]. In Bulac Kalay in Zabul province, insurgents fired heavy weapons from the cover of an orchard, with small teams ensconced on the ridgeline above [see Vignette 14]. Near the village of Chalbar in northeast Kandahar, insurgents fought through airstrikes by taking cover beneath large boulders on the side of a mountain [see Vignette 15]. In Kandahar's lush and heavily cultivated Panjwayi valley, the Taliban fired from the cover of fields and orchards, and moved unobserved through the valley's many irrigation canals [see Vignette 17].

The Taliban made extensive use of field fortifications to defend base areas. In the Panjwayi valley, insurgents built bunkers covered with wooden beams and dirt that were capable of withstanding airstrikes. They also took cover in small grape-houses with thick mud-brick walls and slits from which to fire from [see Vignette 17]. In the Gulistan valley of Farah, the Taliban built numerous firing positions out of rocks along mountain faces overlooking the road [see Vignette 3]. In 2007, insurgents ensconced in a fort near Garmshir fought through airstrikes and flanked British forces by using tunnels dug under the fort's walls that ran over 100 meters into nearby hills.

In some areas where the Taliban were particularly strong, they built static defensive lines. North of Now Zad, insurgents built multiple layers of defense to prevent Coalition forces from getting near their base areas, especially IED factories. These defensive lines

included firing positions that were mutually supporting. When Coalition forces attacked one firing position, they came under attack from multiple directions [see Vignette 18].

When attacked from the air, insurgents dispersed, moved, and used natural cover, particularly in orchards and fields that inhibited visibility from above. This was the case in the Panjwayi valley in 2006 [see Vignette 17]. Afghan insurgents tended to be well-drilled in how to mitigate the impact of air and artillery bombardment, drawing on tactics developed during the 1980s against the Soviet military, which relied heavily on artillery and airpower.

When defending base areas, insurgents occasionally used mosques as firing positions, and civilians as human shields. In 2008, the Taliban repeatedly used a mosque south of Sangin to detonate IEDs and ambush British foot patrols [see Vignette 7]. During an ambush at Shewan village in Farah province in May 2009, insurgents hid in buildings where civilians were present. During a kill-capture mission northeast of Sangin in 2006, insurgents guarding a high-level commander sent groups of women and children forward and fired over their heads at British troops.

On several occasions in 2006, such as the defense of Panjwayi in Kandahar and Musa Qala in Helmand, insurgents attempted to defend base areas in a quasi-conventional manner – from fortified positions manned by hundreds of fighters armed with small arms and heavy weapons. These defensive operations attracted extensive media coverage and demonstrated the Taliban's will and ability to mass large numbers of fighters and defend territory against major Coalition offensives.

The Taliban occasionally succeeded in repelling an assault. In most cases, however, the insurgents were forced to retreat after taking heavy casualties [see Vignette 17]. After 2006, Taliban leaders based in Pakistan ordered mid-level commanders in Afghanistan to disperse their forces in order to avoid catastrophic attacks by the Coalition. In 2007 and 2008, the Taliban made fewer attempts to hold ground in semi-conventional operations involving large concentrations of fighters.

When forced out of key base areas, insurgents often dispersed, retreated, and then went back on the offensive with IED attacks and small ambushes. They either fled and infiltrated back in following clearing operations, or simply went underground for a while before re-emerging with changed tactics. In the Gumbad valley, the Taliban put up only sporadic resistance and withdrew. They returned soon after to carry out IED explosions and snap ambushes across the valley, particularly on the narrow road leading to the patrol base [see Vignette 16]. In the Panjwayi, the Taliban infiltrated back into the valley after being pushed out, and blended in with the local population. Many insurgents never left. They moved around unarmed during the day, and moved their weapons at night, stashing them in numerous arms caches scattered throughout the valley. Small groups of insurgents then relentlessly harassed Canadian forces attempting to hold the valley and do reconstruction [see Vignette 17].

IEDs and hit-and-run attacks in recently cleared areas raised the costs of holding these places, delayed reconstruction, and prevented the government from consolidating its control. The Taliban also established new bases in areas with little or no Coalition presence. Following British operations in Musa Qala in 2007, Taliban fighters gathered further north in the mountains of northern Helmand. Many also set up new bases to the west in the Pashtun areas of Farah province, where there were few US or NATO troops.

The following pages describe in detail how insurgents deployed these tactics in specific engagements. IEDs and suicide attacks fall outside the purview of this study, which focuses on direct fire engagements. Marines should remember, however, that IEDs and suicide bombings are prevalent in Afghanistan, and that these tactics are also evolving.

# CHAPTER ONE: AMBUSHES

Ambushes have been a staple of Afghan insurgent tactics since the war against the Soviets in the 1980s. Afghanistan is a sparsely populated country with poor roads. The Coalition's long, stretched out lines of communication present an easy target. Since 2001, the Taliban has employed a wide variety of ambush tactics against mounted and dismounted patrols, in barren mountains and lush valleys. Most ambushes were hit-and-run, lasting less than 30 minutes. Yet, many lasted for hours.

## Vignette 1: Ambush in Now Zad, Helmand, June 2006

**Key points**

The British brigade that took over Helmand in the spring of 2006 had only one full battalion, along with some smaller detachments. One of those detachments was D Company, 2nd Battalion, Royal Gurkha Rifles.

Because of the threat the Taliban posed to towns across Helmand, the British army spread its forces far and wide. One of the more dangerous districts was Now Zad where a platoon of Gurkha rifles occupied the district center.

In June, the platoon launched a raid on a Taliban compound outside the town where a mid-level insurgent commander was believed to be hiding. The insurgents ambushed a platoon of Gurkhas before they reached the compound. The Taliban fired from prepared positions in an orchard, and attempted to encircle and close on the Gurkhas' position.

Additional forces sent to clear the compound faced heavy resistance from insurgents who constantly attacked British forces as they tried to clear the area. The Taliban commander managed to escape during the fighting.

**Raid on Now Zad**

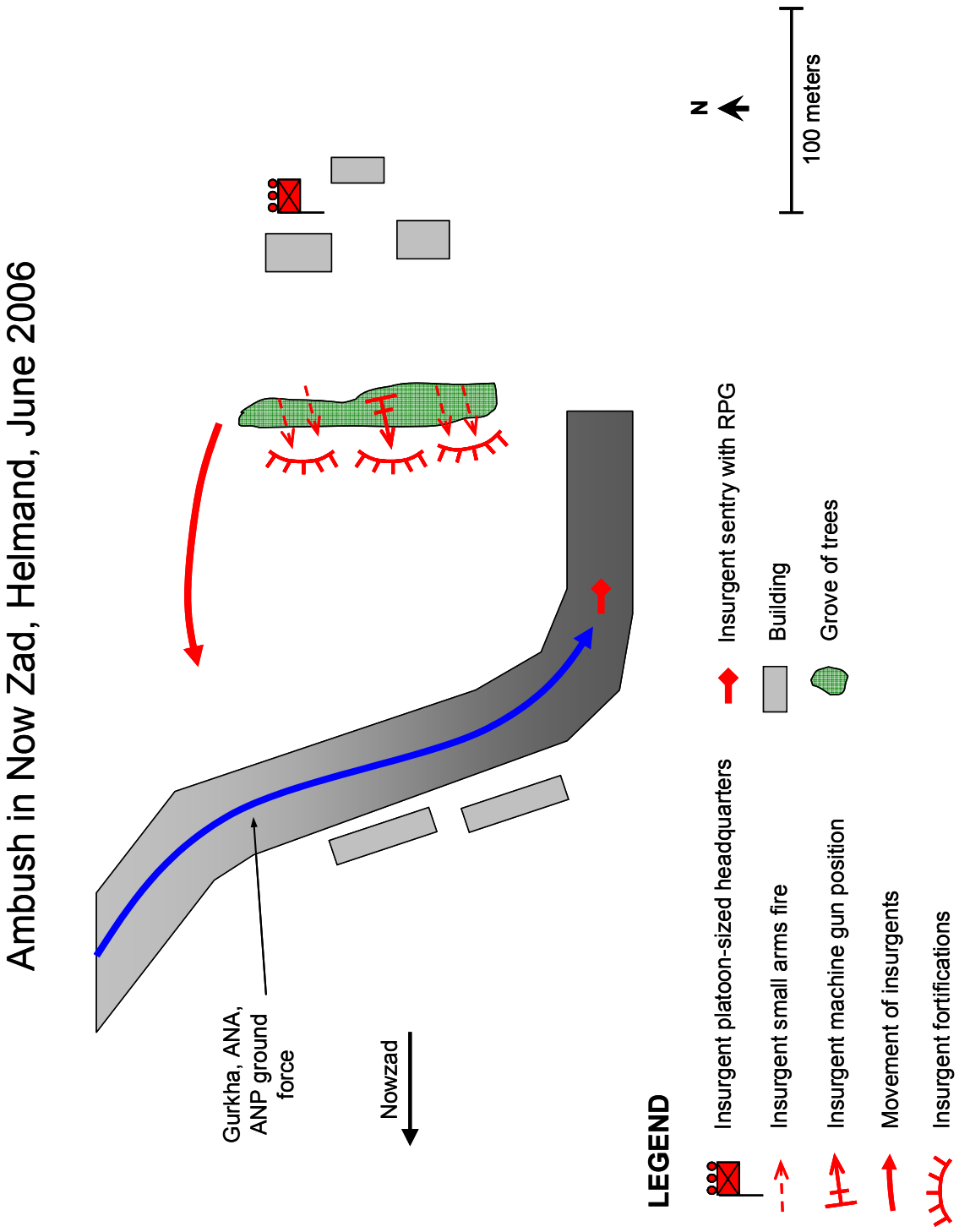
During early June the British organized a raid against a mid-level Taliban leader in a compound over a kilometer east of the district center. Known as Operation Mutay, this was the first major British operation against the Taliban. The target was a walled compound. The raid was meant to be a "soft-knock," meaning that British forces would go in carefully and detain the target without causing a lot of destruction.[1]

To execute the operation, A Company, 3rd Para would air assault into the town. Meanwhile, a platoon of Gurkhas would establish a cordon, as well as escort a cadre of Afghan army and police.

While the Gurkhas held the cordon, Afghan soldiers and police would join A Company in the actual "knock" to detain the target. The 3rd Para "patrols platoon" (a special reconnaissance element) would cordon the compound from the southwest. The operation was scheduled for 4 June.[2]

The Taliban had set up defensive positions around the compound, including an extensive array of sentries. Fighters stood ready to ambush British forces that passed near their positions. There would be nothing soft about the upcoming operation.

The Gurkhas moved out at 11:00 am. Eight vehicles were loaded with 28 Gurkhas and four British explosive ordnance disposal specialists. Two vehicles were loaded with the handful of Afghan soldiers and policemen. The Gurkhas drove north of the compound and then south down a wadi in order to cordon the compound from the east.[3]


Ambush in Now Zad, Helmand, June 2006
Gurkha, ANA, ANP ground force
Nowzad
N
100 meters
LEGEND
Insurgent platoon-sized headquarters
Insurgent small arms fire
Insurgent machine gun position
Movement of insurgents
Insurgent fortifications
Insurgent sentry with RPG
Building
Grove of trees

**Ambush on convoy**

As the lead vehicle turned a corner and neared the compound, it ran into one of the Taliban sentries, who was armed with an RPG. The sentry was just five meters from the vehicle. Before he was gunned down by the Gurkhas, he got off an RPG round, which went through the open vehicle and struck the steering wheel. Fired from so close to its target, the RPG did not have time to arm. It did not explode but bounced off into the wall of the wadi. The dud damaged the vehicle's steering, forcing the convoy to stop.

At the same time, the rest of the convoy was ambushed from the left by at least 30 insurgents armed with a medium machinegun as well as Kalashnikovs and RPGs. The insurgents were in prepared positions 100 meters away in a small grove of trees. A command post and ammunition re-supply point had been set up in a village further back.

With the front vehicle immobilized, the Gurkhas, ANA, and police dismounted and took cover behind two mud walls on the other side of the wadi. At that point, Taliban fire had them fixed. They insurgents blasted away at the mud walls, one of which began to give way as rounds punched through and struck the dirt behind the Gurkhas. The Gurkhas ran behind another mud wall, but the problem remained. The commanding officer attempted to call in air support. Meanwhile, more Taliban could be seen reinforcing their positions.

Over the next hour, the Taliban closed in on the Gurkhas, Afghan army, and police. The other mud wall began to collapse under the weight of their fire. At the same time, the Afghan soldiers detected Taliban fighters enveloping the position. Gurkhas fired rifle-launched grenades to keep them back. In this dire situation, one officer rushed into the open and to the vehicles to get a radio that could call for air support. Luckily he managed to do this unscathed.

With that, the Gurkhas were able to call in close air support from British Apache attack helicopters. The Apache pilots could see Taliban fighters resupplying in the village. They could also see them enveloping the British position. The Apaches made three runs. As they did so, the Gurkhas counterattacked, charging to the crest of the other side of the wadi. From this improved position they put accurate rounds on target and gained fire superiority.

The Taliban held their positions despite the air strikes. The Gurkhas bounded back 200 to 300 meters to the vehicles. In the process, one Afghan soldier was injured by Taliban fire. One Taliban was killed at close range near the vehicles. The British got the lead vehicle moving while under heavy fire. Slowly reversing they managed to withdraw. Several hours later, they returned to the district center.

The British and Afghans suffered only one casualty in this engagement. Taliban casualties were at least two.

During this time, the rest of the British force had its fair share of fighting as well. The patrols platoon fought off ten Taliban while the air assault company endured attacks the whole day as they cleared the compound itself. The insurgents seemed to take the worst

of each tactical engagement, but the Taliban leader was not captured.[4] It was the beginning of a long hard campaign in Now Zad.

**Conclusion**

From the first battle, the Taliban demonstrated impressive tactical sophistication. They used cover and concealment well, including prepared defensive positions, attempted to maneuver, fired accurately, showed strong resolve, and had some degree of command and control.

This incident also demonstrates that the Taliban are capable of defending important bases, particularly if they contain mid or high-level insurgent commanders. The Taliban struck well before British troops reached the compound, and managed to delay the raid long enough to allow their leader to escape.

The Taliban displayed these skills again and again in later months. The only thing they lacked was the ability to coordinate ground maneuver with indirect fire. Had they been able to, they might have launched a direct assault, and made a tough situation much worse.

## Vignette 2: Hasty Ambush in Shewan, Farah, July 2007

**Key points**

In early July 2007, a group of some 200 insurgents led by a seasoned former Mujahideen commander ambushed a group of several hundred Coalition and Afghan forces at the town of Shewan in Farah province.

The insurgents tricked the convoy into stopping at a set location near a fortified building on a hill with well-concealed firing positions. They then pinned the convoy down in a mosque and attempted to flank and encircle. When bombed by Coalition aircraft, they played dead by holding their fire for over 30 minutes.

A local tribal chief, who may have been involved in luring the convoy into the town, told the press the next day that over 108 civilians had been killed in US air strikes.

**Convoy clears Shia Jangal, decides to move on Shewan**

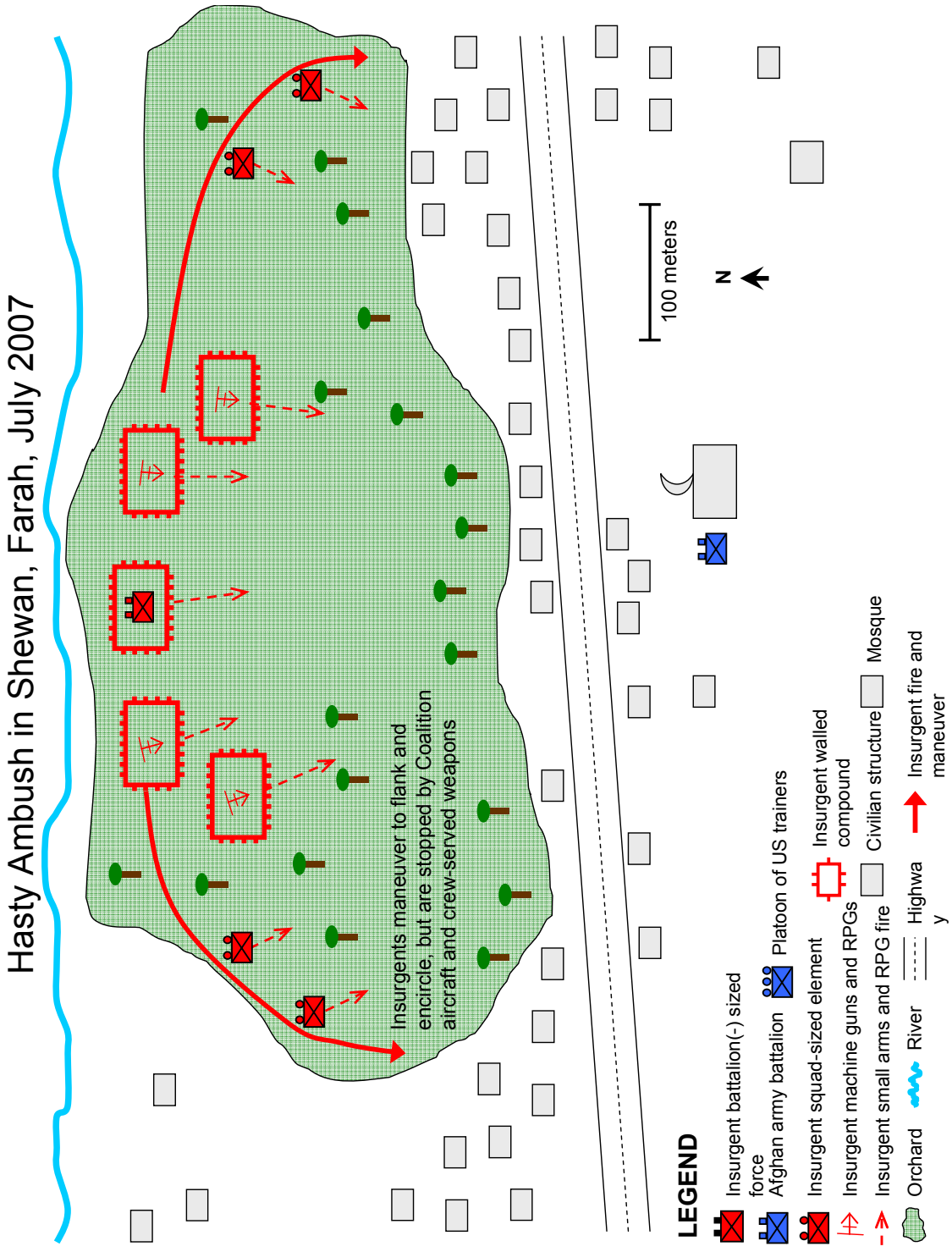
At about 4:00 am on 6 July 2007, about 35 US advisors and police and army trainers moved out of Forward Operating Base Farah to meet up with 400 Afghan soldiers from the 1st, 2nd, and 3rd Brigades of the Afghan Army's 207 Corps – based at Farah, Shindand, and Herat – and led by the 1/207 ANA Brigade Commander. There were also some 200 police commanded by the provincial police chief.[5]

Their mission was to conduct a cordon-and-search in the small village of Shia Jangal in Bala Baluk district in north-central Farah. There had been many IEDs along Highway 517, which ran by Shia Jangal, including a recent car bomb attack. It was to be the largest Afghan-led operation in the history of the country since the new army was stood up in 2003.[6]

Some time after 6:00 am, the convoy arrived at Shia Jangal, about 58 kilometers northeast of Farah city. The Afghan army and police cordoned off the village and searched many of the houses. They found some weapons and IED-making materials.[7]

There were few military-aged males in the village or its surrounds. Most had heard of the approaching convoy and left the area. The insurgents among them joined with several hundred others to the north. Shia Jangal would have been difficult to defend against such a large Afghan and US force. It was a small village of scattered farms in an open area. It was also not a major insurgent stronghold.[8]

By 11:00 am, the operation was over; it was dubbed a great success with not a shot fired. The Afghan army and police commanders phoned their superiors, the Farah governor, and other leaders. They then camped near the town and cooked a goat.[9]


Hasty Ambush in Shewan, Farah, July 2007
Insurgents maneuver to flank and encircle, but are stopped by Coalition aircraft and crew-served weapons
100 meters
N
LEGEND
Insurgent battalion(-) sized force
Afghan army battalion
Platoon of US trainers
Insurgent squad-sized element
Insurgent walled compound
Insurgent machine guns and RPGs
Civilian structure
Mosque
Insurgent small arms and RPG fire
River
Highway
Insurgent fire and maneuver
Orchard

As they ate their lunch, they heard that the local Taliban were telling people that the Afghan army was cowardly for not marching on Shewan, a larger town about 10 kilometers to the west. The ANA brigade commander decided to move on Shewan in the afternoon in order to maintain momentum. The police chief concurred. So did the 207 ANA Corps Commander in Herat and the Farah provincial governor.[10]

The ANA commander then made some phone calls to leaders of two rival tribes in Shewan – the Noorzai and the Barakzai – to organize a shura. The purpose of the meeting was to get the area's tribal chiefs to agree to support the government and allow a permanent Afghan army garrison in the town. At the time, there were no soldiers or police inside Shewan, and just two police checkpoints on the town's outskirts. A meeting place was agreed upon, near a mosque by the side of the highway near the center of town.[11]

The US training team advised against going any further. They had not planned for an operation on Shewan, a relatively large, densely populated town with virtually no government presence and a long history of insurgent activity and resistance to outsiders. The ANA brigade commander and police chief refused to back down.[12]

It is likely that once the ANA commander set a place and time for the shura, some of the tribal leaders informed a group of insurgents based in Shewan. Others camped in the northern part of the district may have come into the town once word spread that the convoy was continuing on to Shewan. In all, as many as 200 insurgents massed in the town.[13]

Most of them set up in a fortified compound in a small orchard overlooking the location where the shura was to take place. The compound was well concealed, had a clear field of fire, and good exit routes north to the river. There they waited as the convoy moved slowly west along Highway 517.[14]

**Ambush at Shewan**

Sometime in the early afternoon, the convoy arrived on the outskirts of Shewan. A company of police moved in first, while the rest of the police set up positions around the town. The police company pushed deep into the town, turning north off the main road where they reportedly looted several houses.[15]

Some US advisors stayed outside the town along with some Afghan army personnel. The ANA and ANP commanders, escorted by the US trainers and several companies of Afghan soldiers and police, drove into the town and got out of their vehicles on the highway near the mosque where the shura was to take place.[16]

There they waited for the tribal chiefs and other elders to arrive, but few did. The only locals who turned up were four or five old men with little or no apparent authority. These men began talking with the ANA and ANP commanders. As they did, the US police and army trainers noticed that civilians, including women and children, were trickling out of the town.[17]

Soon after, the insurgents opened fire with automatic weapons and RPGs on the ANA, ANP, and their trainers. Most managed to take cover inside the compound of a mosque south of the highway, but a small group that included the police chief were pinned down north of the road where there was less protection.[18]

Most of the fire was coming from a walled compound 200 meters north of the road, which was hidden behind a small orchard. The trees prevented the soldiers from seeing exactly where the fire was coming from.[19]

The ANA's embedded training team launched a heavy volley of suppressive fire as the rest of the group moved south of the road. A member of the police mentor team escorting the police chief was shot in the leg as he crossed the highway.[20]

Around the same time, insurgents armed with small arms and RPGs ambushed a company of Afghan police on a side-street somewhere north of the highway about 500 meters northwest of the mosque where the rest of the force was clustered. Insurgents killed about 16 police, wounded several others, and destroyed as many as six police vehicles. Those police who survived abandoned their trucks and fled south of the highway, where they joined the rest of the force.[21]

The US advisors outside the town called for air support. They were told that since no air support had been scheduled for the second operation on Shewan in the afternoon, it would take as long as 90 minutes for the planes to arrive.[22]

In the meantime, the volume of insurgent fire directed at the mosque became heavier and more accurate. The US embedded trainers saw that many of the insurgents were leaving their compound north of the highway and moving east and west in an attempt to flank the soldiers' position. The ANA and their trainers reportedly shot several of them. There were also reports coming in, saying that an additional 100 or more insurgents were coming from the north to join the ambush.[23]

A Coalition airplane arrived later and strafed the area north of the highway, killing many of the insurgents attempting to encircle the mosque. It then dropped a bomb that destroyed part of the walled compound where most of the insurgents were massed. Some 25 were killed, but most survived unscathed.[24]

The firing immediately stopped. It appeared to the Afghan soldiers and their commanders that the bomb had destroyed the compound and killed most of the insurgents. The soldiers waited for nearly 30 minutes, but all was quiet.

In the meantime, the insurgents, most of whom had survived the bombing, held their fire – waiting either for the aircraft to fly away or for the soldiers to leave the cover of the mosque compound and enter the field of fire.

One of the ANA battalion commanders then brought together about 35 soldiers and 15 police under the command of a company commander and sent them to check on the damage to the insurgents' position, which was about 350 meters away.

The team crossed the road and marched into a large open area south of the insurgents' compound. They were about halfway there when the remaining insurgents opened fire all at once, killing about five ANA and ANP, and forcing the rest to retreat.

The aircraft then dropped three more bombs on the insurgents' compound, killing scores of them – including their leader, a respected and experienced Mujahideen commander who had fought against the Soviets in the 1980s. Those who survived dropped or hid their weapons and fled north to the river.

The soldiers and police decided not to check the building a second time. Instead, they immediately put their wounded on a small convoy back to FOB Farah. The rest moved out about 90 minutes later.

The next day, a local tribal leader told the Afghan and US press that over 100 civilians had been killed in US air strikes in Shewan. A Coalition spokesperson denied that so many civilians had been killed, but provided no further details.[25]

About a month later, a brigade of ANA and their embedded training team went back into Shewan with three additional US combat units, Italian troops, and pre-arranged close-air support. The insurgents fled the town long before the convoy arrived.[26]

Shewan would be the site of several future firefights and IED attacks. In late May 2008, a US combat unit was ambushed in Shewan. Like before, the soldiers saw civilians fleeing the village minutes before coming under heavy small arms and RPG fire from both sides of the road.[27]

**Conclusion**

This event is significant for several reasons. First, the insurgents held their fire after the first bomb was dropped, played dead, lured a company of ANA and ANP into the kill zone, and opened fire again in a disciplined fashion.

Second, several hundred insurgents had massed in a single location with apparently strong command-and-control. The group's leader was also able to call in reinforcements from other parts of the district. Third, the insurgents employed fire and maneuver in an aggressive and disciplined fashion when they attempted to flank and encircle the mosque where the soldiers and police were positioned.

Fourth, the insurgents knew far in advance that the convoy was moving into Shewan. They also knew the location of the planned shura, and set their ambush in an ideal location. Some of the tribal leaders who were asked to attend the shura probably informed the insurgents of the meeting's location. The tribal chiefs may have conspired with the insurgents to arrange the meeting near the insurgents' compound, where an ambush would be most effective.

Fifth, the insurgents set up firing positions in an easily defended, fortified position on a hill surrounded by trees. The building was located off the main road, and a clear path led

north to the river, where Coalition forces would not be able to pursue them except by foot.

Sixth, close air support proved decisive. Had it not been available, the convoy might not have been able to get out of the town safely. The insurgents had the soldiers and police pinned down inside the mosque compound. After over an hour of fighting, four bombs dropped by a Coalition aircraft ultimately forced the insurgents to break contact.

Finally, the sight of civilians fleeing the town in the moments before the engagement was a clear indication that a major ambush was in the offing. The size of the convoy, poor command-and-control among the Afghan forces, and the fact that they were scattered may have prevented the convoy from getting out of the area in time.

## Vignette 3: Complex Ambushes in Gulistan, Farah, October 2007

### Key points

In the span of a week between 29 October and 5 November 2007, several hundred insurgents over-ran three district centers in Farah province in a series of coordinated complex attacks.

The insurgents were counting on a hasty response. In a carefully laid complex ambush in the Gulistan valley on 31 October, insurgents killed 20 Afghan soldiers and police and wounded two US soldiers – part of a 100-man quick-reaction force (QRF) led by US trainers. The insurgents had set up multiple ambush sites along the Gulistan valley, so that the retreating convoy would remain under continuous fire.[28]

Ten days later, Coalition and Afghan soldiers retook the Gulistan district center. As soon as they withdrew, the insurgents reoccupied the town.[29]

### Insurgents take district centers, ambush quick reaction force

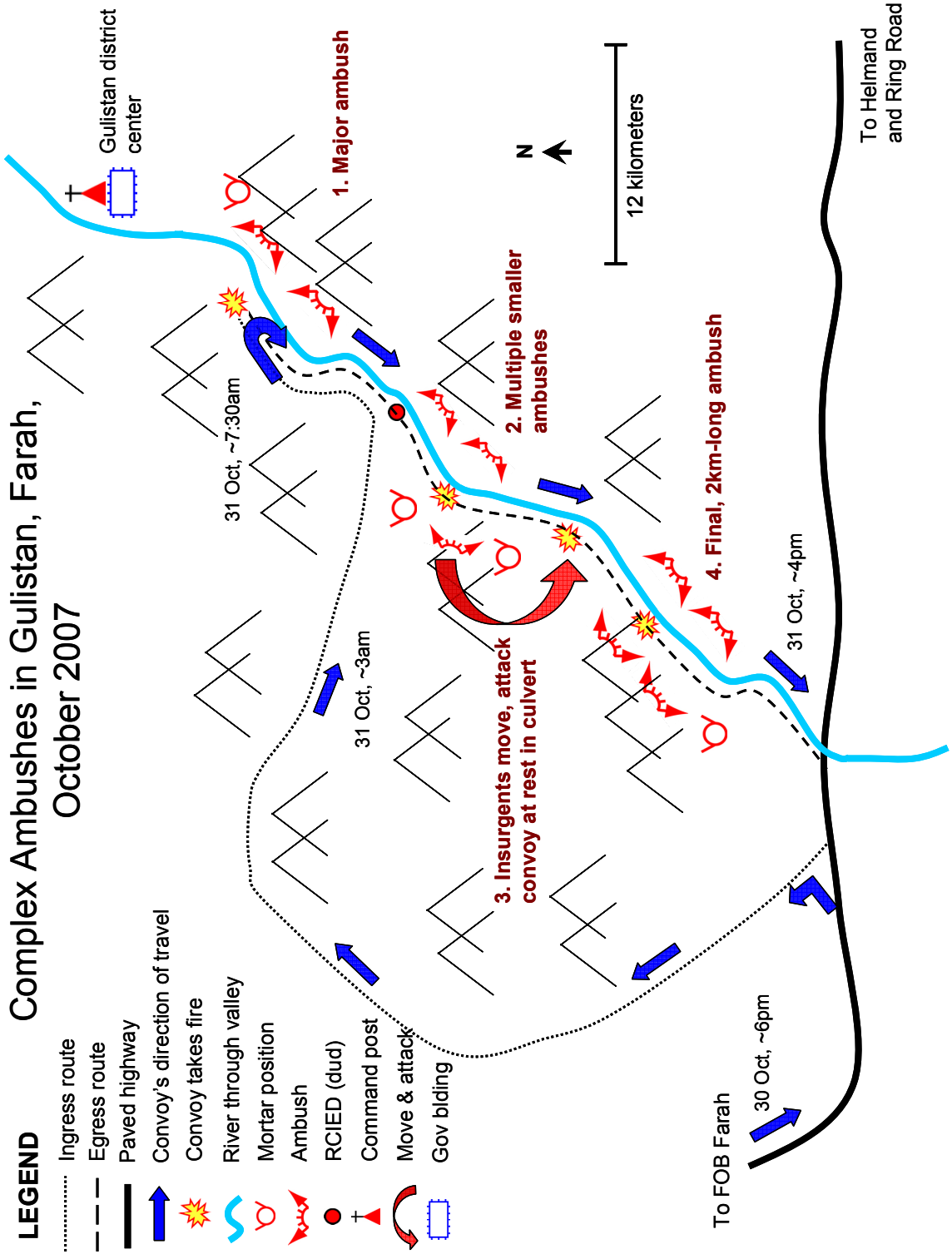
A large group of Taliban fighters overran the Gulistan district center on 29 October, 2007, reportedly killing over 20 policemen. The rest fled, along with the district police chief and sub-governor. The Taliban reportedly beheaded 16 people after occupying the town.[30]

The next day, as US and Afghan forces scrambled to respond, another group of insurgents overran the Bakwa district center. Both towns were in isolated areas known to be thoroughfares for insurgents and opium smugglers. Their defenses consisted of a small contingent of local police far from possible reinforcements.[31]

In late 2007, many insurgents had reportedly flooded into Farah after fleeing Coalition operations in Helmand and Kandahar provinces to the east. They may have massed in Gulistan because it was a well-known transit area with very little Coalition or Afghan government presence. Most probably drove west down the Ring Road, turned north at Delaram near the border with Helmand and Nimruz, and followed the river up into the Gulistan valley.[32]

As soon as the Gulistan district center fell, several hundred heavily armed insurgents took up ambush positions up and down the Gulistan River. Many took cover behind rocks along the face of a large mountain overlooking the northern-most entry point into the valley. There they set up mortar positions, and pre-registered them.[33]

There were only two routes into Gulistan: from the south along the river, and from the west through the mountains. The insurgents chose to attack just north of where the two routes converged, near the village of Ghoziney.[34]


Complex Ambushes in Gulistan, Farah, October 2007
LEGEND
Ingress route
Egress route
Paved highway
Convoy's direction of travel
Convoy takes fire
River through valley
Mortar position
Ambush
RCIED (dud)
Command post
Move & attack
Gov blding
Gulistan district center
To FOB Farah
30 Oct, ~6pm
31 Oct, ~7:30am
31 Oct, ~3am
1. Major ambush
2. Multiple smaller ambushes
3. Insurgents move, attack convoy at rest in culvert
4. Final, 2km-long ambush
31 Oct, ~4pm
12 kilometers
N
To Helmand and Ring Road

Another large group of fighters concentrated at a chokepoint in the southern part of the valley, at the tail end of the only viable egress route for a convoy under fire. The rest spread out in small groups along numerous points in between.[35] Most took cover in small, concealed rock structures overlooking the river.[36]

The insurgents had covered all the possible routes into and out of the valley. They knew what path the convoy would likely take, when it left, and about what time it would arrive at the ambush site. They also knew the likely composition of the convoy, based on their knowledge of what forces were stationed in the area and how the Coalition had responded to similar attacks on district centers in the past.[37]

On the evening of 30 October, a quick-reaction force made up of some 70-80 Afghan army and police led by 20-30 US trainers left for Gulistan. The convoy did not have access to air support. Thinking that the insurgents might have planted mines on the main road along the river, the convoy approached from the west using a long and difficult mountain path. They drove all evening and night and entered the valley in the early morning hours of 31 October.[38]

They then drove north for about two hours towards the district center. At around 7:00 am they arrived at a chokepoint in the valley. On the eastern side was with a large mountain where a large group of insurgents were lying in wait with machine guns, RPGs, and pre-registered mortars. With the sun rising directly ahead, the soldiers in the convoy could barely see.[39]

The insurgents opened fire with small arms from multiple locations on the mountain face. They then launched a carefully aimed mortar, which struck a police vehicle at the head of the convoy, killing most of its occupants. Four Afghan police died in the initial ambush. Three police and two Afghan soldiers became separated from the convoy after leaving their vehicles and fleeing; they were later killed. Several Afghan army and police vehicles – all unarmored Ford Ranger pickup trucks – were damaged or destroyed.

The convoy then turned around and moved south about 200 meters, where it ran into another, smaller ambush. The soldiers fired back but could not see many of the insurgent positions. They decided to get off the main road and away from the open area around the river. They drove about 400-500 meters up a jagged mountain path and eventually found some cover beyond the range of the insurgents' weapons. Stragglers from the Afghan army and police – some of them on foot – met up with the rest of the convoy at this location.

There they stopped, briefly re-consolidated, and called Forward Operating Base (FOB) Farah to secure close air support, but none was available. As they did so, the insurgents moved out of their ambush positions in order to get within range. The convoy commander then decided to move. He led the team back down to the river and sped down the main road at 35-40 mph.

For almost another 1,000 meters, the convoy was under continuous fire from many small positions along the mountains overlooking the river, stretched in a long line down the valley. Many of these positions were small rock structures built days before. The convoy

drove over at least one IED, which did not detonate. It then met up with a small contingent of police trainers from Adreskan in Herat province, moving three or four Humvees.

Soon after, the insurgent fire trailed off and the convoy took cover in a culvert with a mountain on one side and a village on the other. There, the group spent about two hours recuperating and planning to go back north, launch a counterattack, and retrieve the bodies of dead Afghan soldiers and police.

In the meantime, the insurgents moved out of their ambush positions and prepared to attack the convoy while it was at rest. They struck with mortars and heavy small arms fire. The Afghan army and police panicked, jumped out of their vehicles, and ran in different directions. The insurgents shot many of them down as they ran into the open; six Afghan soldiers were killed. The US trainers then followed them in their Humvees and bundled the Afghans into their vehicles.

Seeing that the insurgents were massing for another, even larger attack, the US trainers jettisoned their plan to go back north. Instead, they pulled everyone together and pushed south along the river as fast as they could go on the narrow, dirt track. The road soon flattened out, and the fire trailed off somewhat.

The convoy then passed through another chokepoint – a kind of long gauntlet with high ground close on the right and the river on the left. There, the convoy came under heavy fire from reinforced positions as close as 75 meters. For nearly two kilometers, the soldiers were under unceasing, heavy fire from both sides. As soon as they drove out of range of one position, they came within range of another. Every vehicle in the convoy was hit several times. An RPG hit an Afghan army truck head on, killing six Afghan soldiers and four police.

After some 20 minutes of driving, the convoy finally pushed through the ambush. Around 4:00 pm – after nearly ten hours of repeated ambushes – the troops reached the highway at the mouth of the Gulistan valley where they met with a larger relief column and returned to FOB Farah outside the provincial capital.[40]

**US Special Forces re-take the district centers**

It took US special operations forces over a week to plan an operation to re-take Gulistan and Bakwa. In the meantime, insurgents briefly occupied a third district center at Khaki-Safid on 5 November, after the police abandoned the town. The insurgents looted it, burned it down, and left the next day.[41]

As the Special Forces moved up the Gulistan valley some time around 7 November, they were engaged several times but pushed easily through the ambushes – largely due in large part to substantial close air support, which quickly destroyed insurgent positions on the mountainsides. Before the US and Afghan force arrived at the Gulistan district center, the insurgents had dispersed and fled north into the mountains.[42]

The Special Forces units remained in Gulistan for only a few days, leaving the occupation of the town to the ANA, ANP, and their US trainers. These units were later relieved by Italian forces based in Herat.[43]

Soon after the Special Forces units left Gulistan, Afghan troops re-took the Bakwa district center after hitting an IED on the main road into the town. They remained for only a few hours before leaving again.[44]

Around 22 November, the remaining ANA and Coalition forces left Gulistan.[45] Within hours, the insurgents told the district police that they planned to attack a second time. The 23 police stationed around the town immediately fled. A small group of insurgents then reoccupied the district center, destroyed it, and fled again before Italian forces returned a few days later.[46]

Since the second attack on the Gulistan district center, a small group of Coalition and Afghan forces has remained in or around the town.[47] There have been numerous attacks in Gulistan since, but the district center has remained under government control.

**Conclusion**

The attacks on the district centers took Coalition and Afghan forces by surprise in a region where there were very few combat forces. The nearest maneuver units were Italian troops in Herat several hours away. There was only one platoon-plus of Afghan soldiers in Farah province at the time. The rest of the 207 ANA Corps was tied down in Baghdis province in the northwest.[48]

The insurgents were evidently expecting a hasty response by a mostly Afghan convoy, and were lying in wait. The quick-reaction force went out immediately without air support or dedicated US combat forces other than 20-30 US trainers. Unlike the Special Forces units that later re-took the district center, the convoy led by US army trainers did not have the combat support required to fight effectively against such a large and well-trained Taliban force.[49]

Informants in the Afghan army and police may have told the insurgents that the convoy was coming and the route it planned to take. Even if the mission was not compromised, anyone watching the convoy from the road would know its composition, where it was going, by what route, and when it would likely arrive.[50]

Though no attack of similar magnitude has occurred in Farah since, there have been numerous subsequent reports of insurgent activity in Gulistan and Bakwa districts. As they did in late 2007, insurgents have entered Farah from Helmand in large numbers – often fleeing Coalition operations to the east – where they have massed in large numbers to attack vulnerable checkpoints and convoys.

Gulistan is a major transit point for insurgents and opium smugglers moving to and from Afghanistan's southern and western provinces. As long as this route remains open, it is likely that anti-government forces will continue to mass there in large numbers, especially during the poppy harvest.[51] There, they may attack isolated checkpoints and

convoys, overrun poorly guarded district centers, and set up IEDs and ambushes along major ingress and egress routes.

The 31 October ambush was noteworthy for several reasons. First, it involved multiple firing positions down a mountain valley from which the convoy could not escape. Second, the attack on the district center may have been a ruse to lure the convoy up the valley, where it would be vulnerable to attack.

Third, at one point the insurgents moved out of their fixed positions, pursued the convoy to the culvert where it was hiding, and attacked again – causing the Afghan soldiers and police to panic and disperse. Finally, the attack involved several hundred insurgents moving in a well-coordinated fashion across a large area.

## Vignette 4: Ambush on Foot Patrol near Gereshk, Helmand, January 2008

### Key points

On 2 January 2008, a platoon-sized foot patrol of British troops ran into an ambush by 40-50 insurgents in a heavily cultivated area north of FOB Gibraltar, about 18 kilometers north of Gereshk in Helmand province.

The insurgents fired on the patrol from at least five different directions, most of them from nearby houses. They employed fire and maneuver, cover and concealment, and tried to flank the patrol.

Nine days later, when British forces launched a much larger clearing operation, the insurgents conducted a disciplined retreat. Forward elements provided cover fire while the rest evacuated the dead and wounded.

### Presence patrol engaged from multiple locations

At about 12:30 pm on 2 January 2008, members of 11 Troop, D Company, 40 Commando, Royal Marines marched north out of FOB Gibraltar. The Marines had arrived in the area only weeks before. Their purpose was to familiarize themselves with the heavily cultivated region to the north – an area that had seen little Coalition presence, and where some British and Czech soldiers had been killed the previous year.[52]

The platoon walked across open fields in diamond formation with 24 Section in the lead, 22 and 23 Sections on the left and right flanks, and 21 Section in the rear. About two kilometers north of the FOB, the sections split up: 21 Section remained behind as a support element; 22 Section occupied an over-watch position on a small hill dotted with buildings; 23 Section pushed east; and 24 marched north and passed through several occupied buildings.[53]

24 Section then walked towards a group of uninhabited buildings on a small rise. When they were about 150 meters west of this compound, they saw three insurgents carrying AK-47s and RPGs and marching south towards the buildings. The insurgents opened fire. The Royal Marines fired back, killing all three.[54]

Several insurgents then opened fire on 22 Section from several compounds to the northwest with assault rifles and a heavy machine gun, while others moved further west and south – attempting to outflank the patrol.[55] A group of three insurgents then attempted to push south and occupy the group of uninhabited buildings on a hill near 24 Section, but were killed before they could do so.[56]

A group of insurgents then moved around to the east, occupying two separate compounds. From there they fired on 23 Section, pinning the Marines down in an irrigation ditch.[57] In the meantime, a small group of insurgents to the far west managed to push south, where they targeted the platoon commander and his mortar team.[58]

21 Section then moved north to join 24, and both sections pushed into the cluster of uninhabited buildings that the insurgents had tried to occupy. As it did so, the section took fire from another position to the north. Once inside, the Marines took up elevated positions. From there they could see some locals who continued to dig in their fields despite the shooting.[59]

Two F-15 fighter jets then strafed one of the compounds to the east, killing four insurgents.[60] As darkness fell, around 5:00 pm, the platoon commander ordered the sections to withdraw. The Royal Marines continued to take fire from several locations as they moved south.[61] They eventually broke contact about one kilometer north of the base and returned to the FOB.[62]

**Subsequent clearing operation takes fire**

Nine days later, D Company launched a clearing operation to the north involving artillery, air support, and two platoons – 11 Troop and a platoon-sized reconnaissance force. 11 Troop moved along the east side of the Helmand River, and the recon unit a few hundred meters to the east.[63]

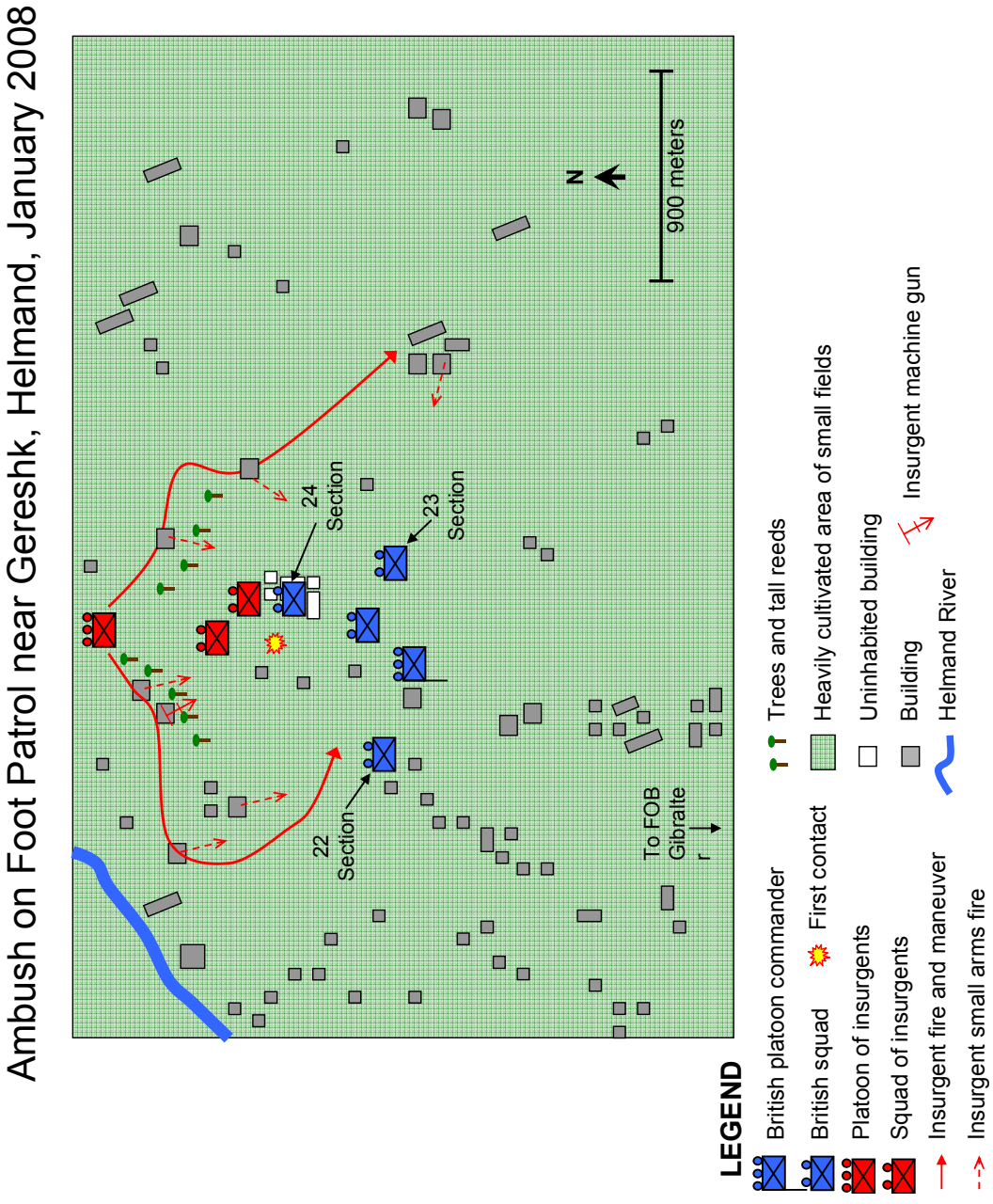
As the force pushed north of the FOB, insurgents fired from some of the same buildings they had used on 2 January – especially the compounds to the west near the river. In all, some 30-40 insurgents were involved in the fighting.[64]

The insurgents soon realized they were facing a much larger force with substantially greater firepower, and slowly withdrew north in a disciplined fashion – providing cover fire for others who were evacuating the dead and wounded. As the insurgents withdrew, they fired from one compound to slow the Marines' advance, then moved to another building, and fired again before moving on. Apache helicopters fired on the insurgents as they moved across open fields.[65]

When the Marines reached a point about five kilometers north of the FOB, they received reports of small cars and pickup trucks dropping off fresh fighters near the highway to the east in groups of four or five. Many moved through an apparently hostile village to the north.[66]

At about 3:00 pm, the Royal Marines stopped their advance, broke contact, and pushed back south to FOB Gibraltar. Some 18 insurgents died in the operation – most of them killed by Apache helicopters.

After 11 January, 11 Troop and others from D Company did numerous patrols north of FOB Gibraltar, but saw little fighting other than small hit-and-run attacks and IEDs. The operation had reportedly pushed most of the hardcore insurgents out of the area.[67]


Ambush on Foot Patrol near Gereshk, Helmand, January 2008
22 Section
24 Section
23 Section
To FOB Gibralte
N
900 meters
LEGEND
British platoon commander
British squad
Platoon of insurgents
Squad of insurgents
Insurgent fire and maneuver
Insurgent small arms fire
First contact
Trees and tall reeds
Heavily cultivated area of small fields
Uninhabited building
Building
Insurgent machine gun
Helmand River

**Conclusion**

In the 2 January ambush, the insurgents made substantial use of fire and maneuver, constantly changing their firing positions. Upon first contact, they immediately moved to flank the Marines and move in behind them. Insurgents fired from fortified buildings – many of them houses with the people still inside – while others moved. A small group of insurgents also tried to close with a squad of Royal Marines, and may have gotten as close as 50 meters.[68]

In the clearing operation on 11 January, the insurgents again made use of fire and maneuver – this time to cover their withdrawal. A forward element moved from building to building, firing at the advancing force, while the rest evacuated the dead and wounded. The Marines found some blood trails and discarded weapons, but no dead or wounded insurgents.[69]

In both engagements, the insurgents had an easy escape available through cultivated areas to the north where there were no Coalition forces to stop them. They could then hide their weapons, walk to the main road, and drive away in vehicles.[70]

## Vignette 5: Complex Ambush in Shewan, Farah, July 2008

### Key points

In late July 2008, a group of about 200 insurgents ambushed a squad of Marines driving through Shewan, a town in Farah province known to harbor large numbers of highly committed and proficient enemy fighters.

The insurgents trapped the convoy in a narrow chokepoint by using armor-piercing RPGs to immobilize the front and rear vehicles. They then pinned the Marines down for almost 20 minutes with machinegun and small arms fire.

As the convoy pushed back out of the ambush, the insurgents gave chase. They fired at the Marines as they moved back down the highway. Enemy fighters then surrounded the squad at its rallying point outside the town and continued to harass the patrol until nighttime.[71]

### Ambush on mounted patrol

On 23 July 2008, a squad from 2nd Battalion, 7th Marines and about 30 Afghan police set out for Shewan in Bala Baluk district in Farah province. The Marines moved in four armored vehicles; the police, in four unarmored Ford Rangers. Their mission was to check on reports of insurgents moving into the town.

Shewan was known to harbor large numbers of well-trained, experienced Taliban fighters. It was the location of a major ambush a year earlier that involved some 200 insurgents arrayed against an entire battalion of Afghan soldiers supported by US trainers and Special Forces [see Vignette 2].

The convoy approached from the east, down Highway 517, which runs through Shewan. As the Marines arrived, approximately 200 insurgents manned ambush positions on both sides of the highway. Many of them were behind thick mud walls capable of stopping heavy machinegun fire. The insurgents had evacuated women and children to the south.

As the Marines entered Shewan, they passed through a bottleneck with buildings close on both sides. The insurgents held their fire, waiting for the entire convoy to pass into the kill zone.

A group of insurgents on the north side of the road launched a volley of armor-piercing RPGs from close range. One penetrated the armor of the convoy's lead vehicle, an MRAP, severing the leg of the turret gunner and knocking the driver unconscious.

The second vehicle attempted to push past, but was also hit by an RPG, which went through the windshield and set the interior of the Humvee on fire, forcing those inside to dismount. Some of the Marines in the second vehicle got into the damaged MRAP at the head of the convoy; the rest, into the vehicle just behind. The third vehicle in the convoy

then attempted to drive north off the road, and the insurgents responded by throwing grenades.

At the same time, another volley of RPGs struck three of the four police vehicles at the rear of the convoy. Those police who survived immediately abandoned their trucks and took cover in a ditch. The remaining vehicles were trapped in the kill zone, unable to get around the damaged trucks at the front and rear of the convoy, and unable to move off the road because of ditches and buildings on both sides.

Insurgents then opened fire with machineguns from concealed positions about 100 meters to the north. There were also enemy fighters armed with assault rifles along the south side of the road, less than 50 meters away. Within minutes of immobilizing the vehicles, insurgents on the north side of the road moved west and established firing positions ahead of the convoy, pinning it down with heavy fire from three directions.

**Insurgents pursue retreating convoy**

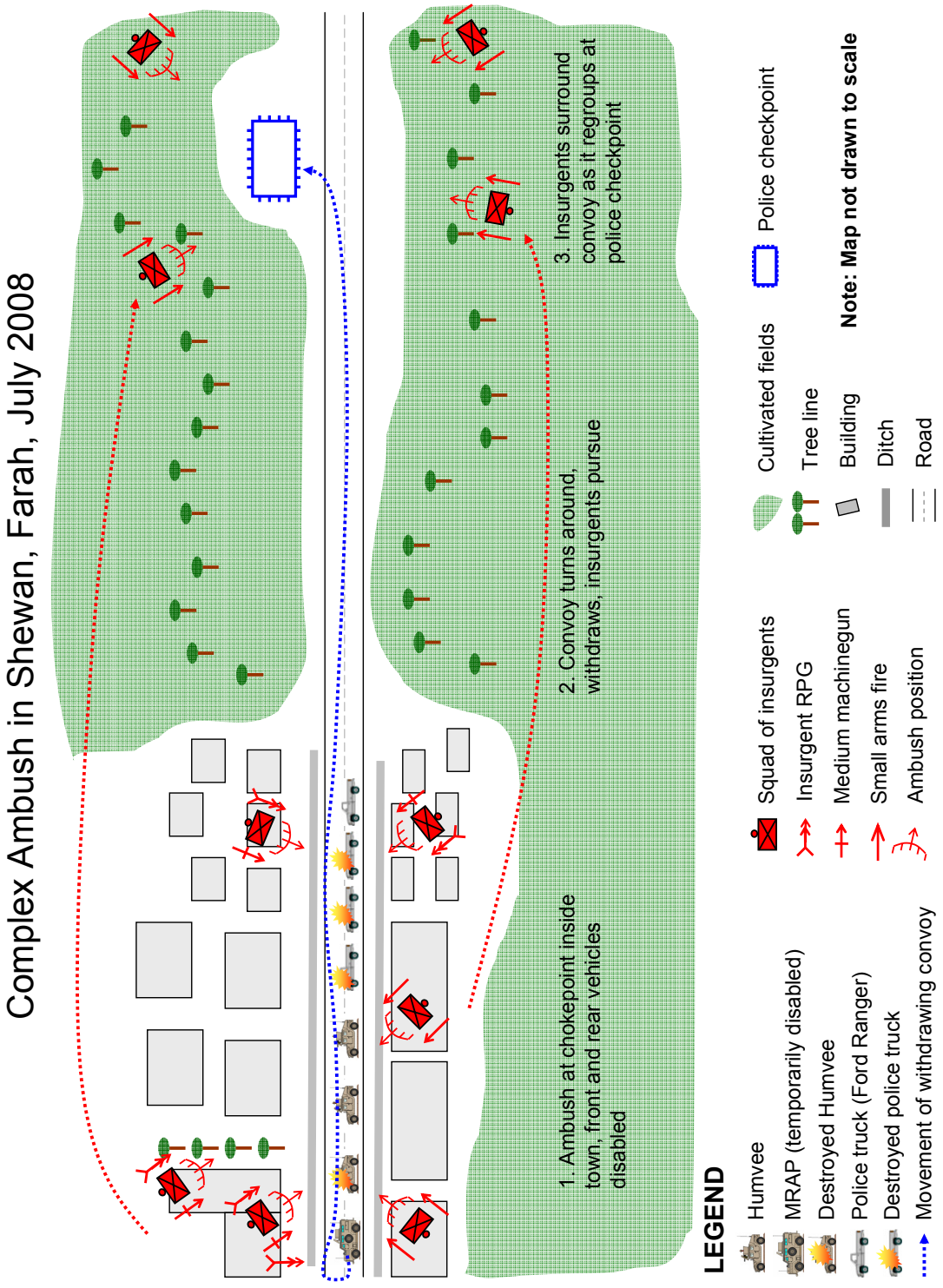
The Marines were stuck in the kill zone for almost 20 minutes before they managed to fight their way out and push back east, leaving behind the burning Humvee and the destroyed police trucks. As they did so, a portion of the enemy force gave chase along the northern side of the road, keeping the convoy under fire.

As soon as the Marines left the town, insurgents looted the police vehicles. They also attempted to take the 50-caliber machinegun off the turret of the burning Humvee. The squad used its Mark 19 to drive the insurgents away from the vehicle.

The squad stopped at a police checkpoint 1,500 meters east of Shewan. The insurgents surrounded the checkpoint and continued firing on the convoy. Two wounded Marines – the driver of the MRAP and the turret gunner – were evacuated in two vehicles. The vehicles took fire for another two kilometers past the police checkpoint while on their way back to base.

The remaining Marines fought off the insurgents around the police checkpoint. They were later reinforced by an additional squad-sized quick-reaction force. There were enemy firing positions 100 to 200 meters all around the checkpoint. Nonetheless, the Marines were able to adequately defend the checkpoint.

As darkness fell, the enemy fire trailed off – after more than four hours of fighting. During the night, the Marines went back into Shewan. They recovered the damaged Humvee and its 50-caliber machinegun without taking fire. The next morning, the Marines recovered the police vehicles as well. They then returned to base.


Complex Ambush in Shewan, Farah, July 2008
1. Ambush at chokepoint inside town, front and rear vehicles disabled
2. Convoy turns around, withdraws, insurgents pursue
3. Insurgents surround convoy as it regroups at police checkpoint
LEGEND
Humvee
MRAP (temporarily disabled)
Destroyed Humvee
Police truck (Ford Ranger)
Destroyed police truck
Movement of withdrawing convoy
Squad of insurgents
Insurgent RPG
Medium machinegun
Small arms fire
Ambush position
Cultivated fields
Tree line
Building
Ditch
Road
Police checkpoint
Note: Map not drawn to scale

**Conclusion**

The ambush in Shewan in July 2008 was typical of many attacks on Russian armored convoys during the 1980s. The insurgents targeted the front and rear of the convoy along a narrow chokepoint, trapping the remaining vehicles in the kill zone.

The insurgents hit the Marines with an L-shaped ambush inside the town, then launched a multi-kilometer linear ambush along the squad's route of exit. Enemy fighters also pursued the convoy and surrounded it at its rallying point 1,500 meters away.

The entire squad of Marines was moving in armored vehicles clustered quite close together. As a result, they were particularly vulnerable to entrapment inside the town. Dismounted Marines moving behind the convoy might have been able to flank the enemy positions. Once the convoy was pinned down under heavy fire, it was exceedingly dangerous for the Marines to get out of their vehicles.

The squad was outnumbered more than ten to one. The insurgents had managed to mass large numbers of fighters for a complex, pre-planned ambush that took the convoy by surprise. The Marines had not anticipated facing so large an enemy force.

The insurgents did considerable damage in less than 20 minutes of fighting inside the town. By the time air support arrived, the heaviest fighting was over and many of the insurgents had moved position. The enemy seemed to be aware that the convoy did not have dedicated air support.

## Vignette 6: Bait and Ambush in Daulatabad, Farah, June 2008

**Key points**

In July 2008, a group of about 25 insurgents lured a squad of US Marines away from their vehicles into a close ambush.

The bait was a handful of insurgents who fired on the patrol outside the village. After firing, the insurgents fled south into an open field; the Marines pursued.

From a series of prepared ambush positions, enemy fighters pinned the Marines down with PK machineguns and RPGs at ranges less than 75 meters.[72]

**Harassing fire intended to draw Marines into fields**

On 19 June 2008, a reinforced squad from Golf Company, 2nd Battalion, 7th Marines, accompanied by 12 Afghan police, went out on a routine patrol. At about 1:00 pm, they left their base, located at the junction of highways 511 and 517 in Farah province. They moved east, along the south side of the Farah Rud River.

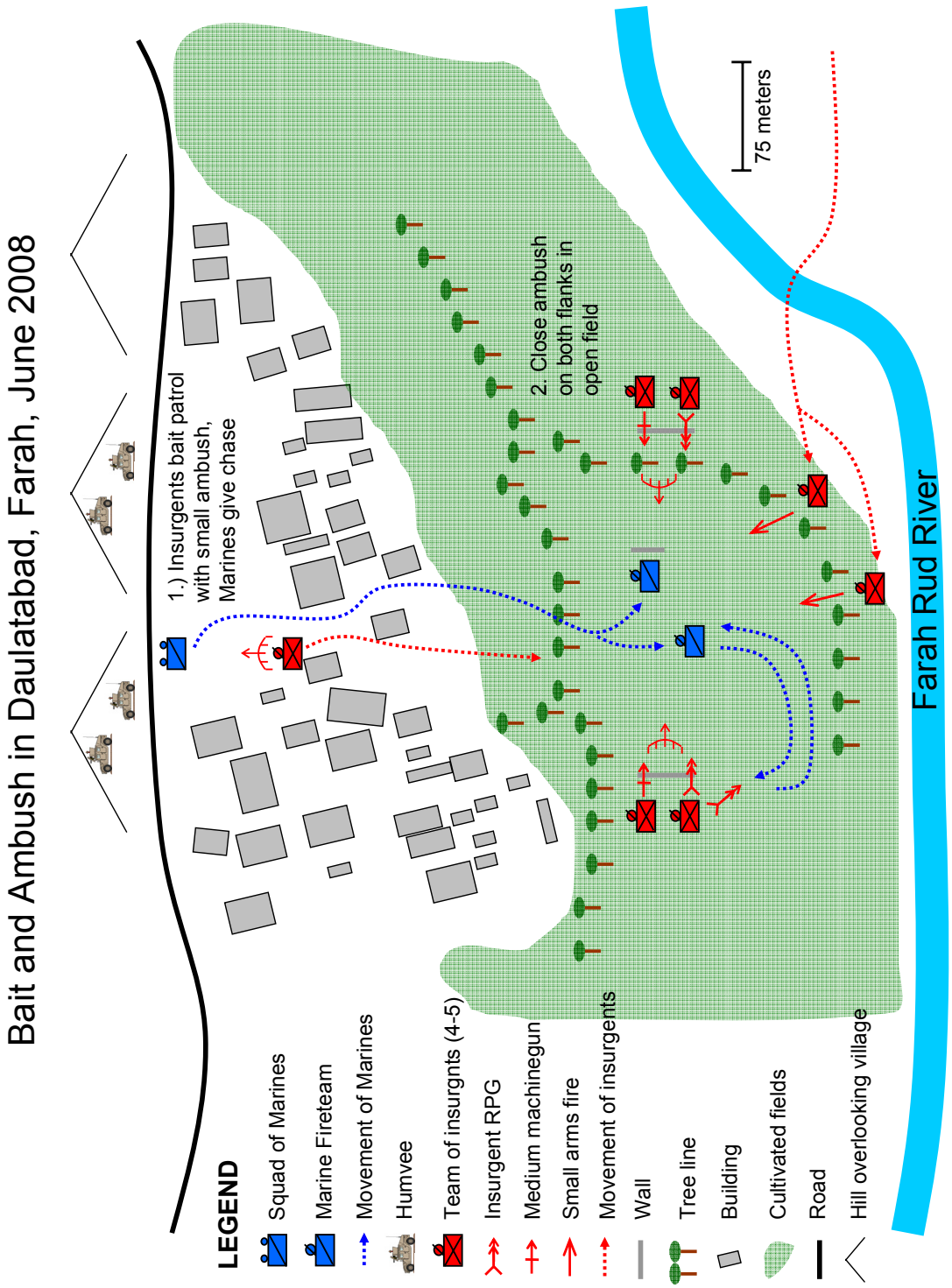
They drove about 10 kilometers to the village of Waryah. Insurgents or their informers in Waryah spread word that the patrol had passed through. They predicted that the convoy would likely pass back the same way, on either the north or the south side of the river.

The convoy drove another five kilometers, crossed on to the north side of the river, and moved back west. Shortly before 4:00 pm, Marines neared Daulatabad village, just across the river from Waryah. The village consisted of a small number of buildings, with fields of crops between them. The river was to the south.

As the patrol passed along the northern edge of the village, a handful of insurgents in a vehicle drove out of the village, fired at the convoy, and went back into the village. The Marines returned fire, hitting the vehicle several times. Insurgents also fired several RPGs at the convoy from one of the buildings, but failed to cause any damage to the patrol.

The squad cordoned off the village and sent a team of Marines and police on foot into the town. In the meantime, insurgents waited in ambush behind a series of thick walls in the fields south of the village. Their aim was to draw the Marines into the open fields, then hit them with machinegun fire from both flanks.

The Marines walked into the village, located the shot-up vehicle, and noticed blood-trails leading south towards the river. Several villagers said the insurgents had fled in that direction. The squad leader radioed back to base and asked for an additional squad of Marines; he waited for the squad to arrive before going further.


Bait and Ambush in Daulatabad, Farah, June 2008
1.) Insurgents bait patrol with small ambush, Marines give chase
2. Close ambush on both flanks in open field
75 meters
Farah Rud River
LEGEND
Squad of Marines
Marine Fireteam
Movement of Marines
Humvee
Team of insurgnts (4-5)
Insurgent RPG
Medium machinegun
Small arms fire
Movement of insurgents
Wall
Tree line
Building
Cultivated fields
Road
Hill overlooking village

**Ambush from both flanks in open field**

At about 5:30 pm, the squad of Marines and Afghan police pushed south towards the river; the additional squad maintained a cordon to the north of the village. The Marines crossed a series of irrigation ditches and entered an open field.

The insurgents waited in ambush, hiding behind a series of thick mud walls on each side of the squad's approach. As the patrol passed by, eight or nine insurgents on the western side of the field opened fire with PK machineguns and RPGs. They hit the Marines' right flank with a heavy volume of accurate fire from less than 75 meters away.

Half the squad managed to take cover behind a low wall in the open field; the rest were pinned down in the open. Two of the Marines in the open attempted to flank the insurgents' position but were stopped by a volley of RPGs. One of the Marines was wounded, forcing both to fall back.

The squad's joint tactical air controller was killed early in the ambush. Several other Marines were wounded; one later died.

Once the squad was pinned down and facing west, about ten insurgents opened fire on the Marines' rear. This second enemy position was behind a thick mud wall in a tree line to the east. The police returned fire on this position, while the Marines remained focused on the enemy to the west.

At this time, the additional squad of Marines north of the village was about 300 meters away. They attempted to drive into the field but were stopped by a series of irrigation ditches that were too wide and deep for the vehicles.

Instead, they moved up onto a hill overlooking the village. They could see the field but not the insurgents, who were well concealed in the foliage. The Marines pinned down in the field helped walk the vehicles' 50-caliber rounds into the enemy positions.

When it was apparent that the Marines were pinned down and air support was not immediately forthcoming, additional enemy fighters flocked to the ambush site. They arrived in several trucks from Waryah village on the other side of the river and attempted to flank the Marines from the south.

The fighting went on for another two hours until dusk. When darkness fell, around 7:30 pm, the enemy fire trailed off; the insurgents broke contact and withdrew.

The Marines evacuated their casualties, and the ambushed squad returned to base. The other squad remained in the village. During the night, about 20 insurgents returned to the battlefield and evacuated their dead and wounded. The Marines detained some of these individuals.

**Conclusion**

The ambush in Daulatabad was cunning, deliberate, and well planned. Small groups of insurgents used harassing fire to draw the Marines away from their vehicles into an open field where they would be vulnerable to a close ambush. They then hit the squad with machineguns from close quarters. It was a classic "bait and ambush" tactic, used many times by the Afghan Mujahideen during the 1980s.

The insurgents observed the Marines moving east through Waryah village, and rightly predicted that the squad would return along a similar route. The enemy had also observed that Marines are more aggressive than other Coalition forces and would, therefore, be more likely to give chase when fired on.

The insurgents probably knew that the Marines' vehicles would not be able to get into the field because of the irrigation ditches along the southern edge of the town. The dismounted Marines were left in the open, armed only with rifles, facing down insurgents firing PK machineguns and RPGs from well-concealed, fortified positions.

The battle lasted four hours from first contact until dusk, when the insurgents broke contact. The insurgents waited until nearly dusk to engage the Marines and then fell back when darkness fell, probably to mitigate the possible effects of airpower.

The insurgents fired from carefully concealed positions very close to the Marine squad, which would have made air support extremely difficult. There were B-1 bombers on station, but they were not able to drop their munitions.

## Vignette 7: Ambushes on Foot Patrols near Sangin, Helmand, 2008

### Key points

Between late March and early October 2008, a company of soldiers from 1 Royal Irish Regiment (1RIR) faced numerous IED attacks and ambushes around Sangin in Helmand province. Most of these attacks occurred in the "green zone", a lush and heavily cultivated area south of the Sangin district center.[73]

Platoon-sized patrols went out regularly from the district center, and later from patrol bases in the green zone where insurgents planted hundreds of IEDs and launched snap ambushes. Insurgents often exploded an IED, then fired on troops for five to 15 minutes before breaking contact. Most ambushes were "L-shaped".

The insurgents made regular use of forward observers, usually unarmed men standing on rooftops or driving around on motorcycles and using cell phones. Some observers were local children. Most of the IEDs were command-wired, designed to get around countermeasures used by British troops on foot patrol.

The soldiers of 1RIR were particularly vulnerable to IEDs and quick ambushes because of the lush terrain, which provided plenty of cover for insurgents. The terrain also forced the soldiers to move on foot. The presence of civilians rendered most artillery and airstrikes counterproductive.

### Suicide bomb in April

On 15 April, a platoon of 1RIR on foot patrol in the green zone encountered an old man squatting in a field. When a section (squad-sized element) of soldiers got within 20 meters of the man, he stood up and detonated the explosives strapped to his body. The platoon later learned that the man was a member of a Waziri tribe from Pakistan.

The blast caused no casualties because there was no fragmentation. Moments after the explosion, insurgents opened fire with RPGs followed by small arms, then quickly broke contact.

### L-shaped ambush in June

On 25 June, a patrol went to the Hazaragon Mosque, about two kilometers south of the Sangin district center. The people in the surrounding village were not used to Coalition forces and were markedly hostile. The soldiers spoke with several elders and a local mullah. The mullah left in the middle of the meeting in order to alert local insurgents to the platoon's presence.

As the platoon left the village, insurgents launched an L-shaped ambush, using three different compounds as firing positions. The ambush began with a volley of RPGs from the south, followed by a short pause. As the soldiers fired in the direction of the RPGs, insurgents in another position to the east engaged with the platoon with machine guns.

The insurgents fought for about 15 minutes and broke contact. They fired in the air as they drove away on motorcycles.

**L-shaped ambush in July**

On 6 July, while moving south down the canal path, soldiers of 1RIR ran into a senior Taliban leader's personal security detachment. The commander had travelled from Pakistan's Mohmand tribal agency to the Sangin area, and was meeting some people at the Hazaragon Mosque, two kilometers south of the Sangin district center.

Unarmed scouts on motorcycles warned of the platoon's approach. The patrol came under fire from three locations to the east and south, including a compound directly ahead of the platoon. The insurgents then fired from a building behind the patrol to the north; the soldiers had moved through this building only minutes before.

The insurgents fought for an hour, preventing the platoon from moving south to the Hazaragon Mosque, where their leader was having a meeting.

Under fire from the front and rear, as well as their left flank, the platoon shot a man who had an RPG. Insurgents nearby evacuated the wounded gunner and broke contact. The platoon used small arms and grenades kill another five insurgents before the rest broke contact. The insurgents fired in the air as they fled.

**IED attack and snap ambush in early September**

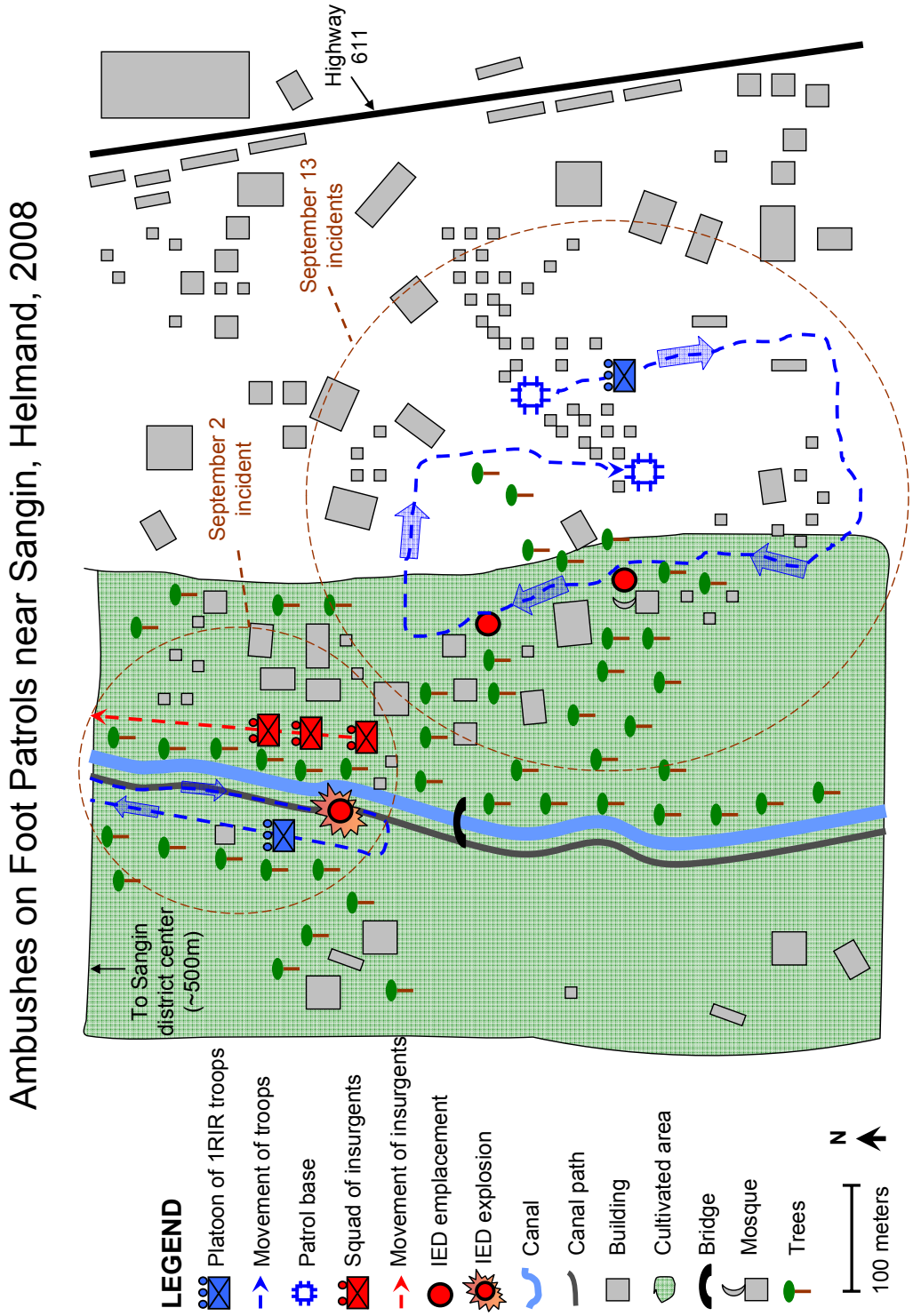
On 2 September, a platoon was marching south down a footpath running along a large canal through the green zone, as it had done many times before. At about 6:20 pm, the patrol ran into a command-wired IED located 100 meters north of a bridge over the canal. The explosion wounded one soldier.

The explosive, a 105mm shell, was buried in the soft earth of the canal path at a location used several times before to plant IEDs. Its wire was covered with dirt and ran east across the canal.

The insurgents had drawn a circle on the ground near the IED and put black-and-white flags in a tree nearby – signs that locals would recognize, but not British troops might not. The soldiers had noticed the circle, but did not realize what it signified until after the explosion.

As the platoon leader ran to assist the wounded soldier, insurgents on the opposite side of the canal opened fire from the cover of a cornfield, pinning the officer down. The rest of the platoon suppressed the insurgents' positions and attempted to evacuate the wounded soldier.

In the midst of heavy fire from the platoon, the insurgents fired several mortars, wounding a second soldier. The mortar was pre-registered to land near the site of the IED explosion.


Ambushes on Foot Patrols near Sangin, Helmand, 2008
Highway 611
September 13 incidents
September 2 incident
To Sangin district center (~500m)
LEGEND
Platoon of 1RIR troops
Movement of troops
Patrol base
Squad of insurgents
Movement of insurgents
IED emplacement
IED explosion
Canal
Canal path
Building
Cultivated area
Bridge
Mosque
Trees
N
100 meters

The insurgents then moved north around the platoon, attempting to cut off its retreat back to the district center. The insurgents on the eastern side of the canal kept the platoon under heavy fire as it moved back north.

**Daisy-chained IEDs in September**

On 13 September, the platoon discovered a daisy-chained, command-wired IED, this time on the eastern side of the canal near a planned patrol base. The explosives were buried in two craters made by previous IED explosions.

The wire ran into a building known to the soldiers as Mosque 29. Insurgents had used Mosque 29 as a firing position at least three times before against soldiers of 1RIR. It was also a known IED trigger point.

Behind the mosque was a narrow path shielded by trees that provided insurgents with an easy escape route. At least two or three insurgents were waiting to detonate the IED. They used children as forward observers; the children communicated with the triggerman through the wall of the mosque.

The triggerman could not see the blast location, and so was not within site of the platoon. The soldiers surrounded the mosque as they approached and used smoke grenades. It is likely that the triggerman fled rather than detonate the device.

After disposing of the device, the platoon moved north about 100 meters, where it discovered a second daisy-chained IED next to a compound. The command wire ran west through the compound to the edge of a field.

The next day, as the platoon set up a new patrol base nearby, insurgents detonated an IED less than 40 meters from the new position. The wire for the explosive ran more than 160 meters away to a small building. No one was injured in the explosion. Following the blast, soldiers saw the triggermen fleeing into a nearby village.

Later that year, a US Marine Explosive Ordnance Disposal (EOD) team hit a daisy-chained IED while moving south down the canal near Mosque 29. The IED had four linked charges triggered by a command wire running over the canal. The insurgents had used this same spot for IEDs at least ten times before.

Seconds after the explosion, insurgents hiding on the other side of the canal opened fire. The insurgents had used these firing positions before, and a squad of British troops were watching them. The squad closed on the ambush party and killed three insurgents. The rest of the insurgents evacuated their wounded and fled.

**Conclusion**

The IED cell operating against the soldiers of 1RIR in 2008 was sophisticated and adaptive. It was also extremely prolific. The area south of the Sangin district center was littered with IEDs, most of them laid at night in the soft earth of footpaths. Insurgents planted at least 90 IEDs in August alone, in an area 600 meters by 1,200 meters.

The cell learned quickly that command-wired IEDs were most effective at defeating electronic countermeasures. The soft ground of the green zone made it easy to bury wires and explosives and conceal the overturned earth. The cell often laid IEDs without telling local villagers. Insurgents sometimes killed tribal leaders who protested.

The IED cell relied heavily on forward observers, including local children. Most were men standing on rooftops communicating with their comrades by cell phone. Most triggermen could not see the IED blast site, and so would be out of view of the platoon when the IED exploded. As the platoon started shooting forward observers ("dickers" in British parlance), it faced fewer IEDs. This change to the rules of engagement made it riskier for the insurgents to detonate IEDs.

The insurgents sometimes marked the locations of IEDs so that locals would not be harmed by them. They used markers that would be evident to locals but not to troops on patrol. Insurgents often used the same locations repeatedly, often burying IEDs in craters caused by previous explosions. They also used the same firing positions over and over.

The cell preferred to combine quick ambushes with IED explosions, exploiting the confusion caused by an IED blast to fire RPGs and small arms for five to 15 minutes, and broke contact before air support arrived. The insurgents knew from experience about how long it would take for aircraft to come on station. While fleeing and evacuating casualties, they laid down suppressive fire or just fired in the air.

The insurgents carried only a few magazines of ammunition, and so ran out of bullets quickly. When they saw soldiers closing on their positions, they tended to drop their weapons and flee. If apprehended, they pretended to be civilians.

They preferred to fire from the opposite side of the canal, making it difficult for the patrol to close on their positions. The insurgents regularly mined the bridges over the canal to prevent soldiers from crossing it during an engagement. They also locked civilians in compounds and fired from these buildings, effectively using local people as human shields.

During an ambush, the insurgents maneuvered constantly and spread themselves out in small teams, rendering artillery and airstrikes ineffective. The soldiers of 1RIR discovered that it was best to close on the insurgents immediately. Observing the tendency of the troops to close, insurgents sometimes fired on a patrol in order to lure it unawares into an IED kill zone.

The British pattern of spreading platoon-sized patrols out into sections (squad-sized elements) separated by 100-200 meters kept the Taliban off balance. Most of the time, only one or two sections were visible to the insurgents, leaving at least one section in an undetermined location. This section could then close on the insurgents unawares. The Taliban suffered the greatest casualties when engaged by unobserved sections moving in-

depth. Flanking sections moving in-depth, as well as regular patrolling and use of snipers, prevented insurgents from being able to attack at will.

The insurgents around Sangin were extremely effective at evacuating their casualties and burying them within 24 hours in accordance with their religious beliefs. It was rare for the soldiers of 1RIR to capture wounded insurgents or find their bodies. The insurgents tended to move in groups of three, so that if one was hit, there would be one man to provide suppressive fire while the other evacuated the casualty.

## Vignette 8: Ambush in Washir, Helmand, December 2008

### Key points

In December 2008, a group of about 10-15 insurgents ambushed a squad of Marines in a small village near the Washir district center in Helmand province.

The Marines quickly defeated the ambush through a combination of mounted and dismounted maneuver. Marines moving unnoticed on foot attacked the insurgents from the flank, while Marines in vehicles outflanked the insurgents from the other side.[74]

### Ambush by squad of insurgents

In December 2008, a reinforced squad of US Marines attached to 2nd Battalion, 7th Marines was sent on a reconnaissance mission to the district of Washir in west-central Helmand. The purpose of the mission was to talk to people in and around the district center and gather basic information on the enemy presence in the district.

At that time, Washir was almost entirely controlled by the Taliban. The Coalition sent few patrols to the district. Almost all of those sent before had been fired on. The British previously had established a district government and police station in Washir, but the Taliban had forced them out.

The village of Duznow was on the way to the Washir district center. The Marines intended to make it appear as if they were heading for the district center, so that the insurgents would mass there. Their real objective was Duznow.

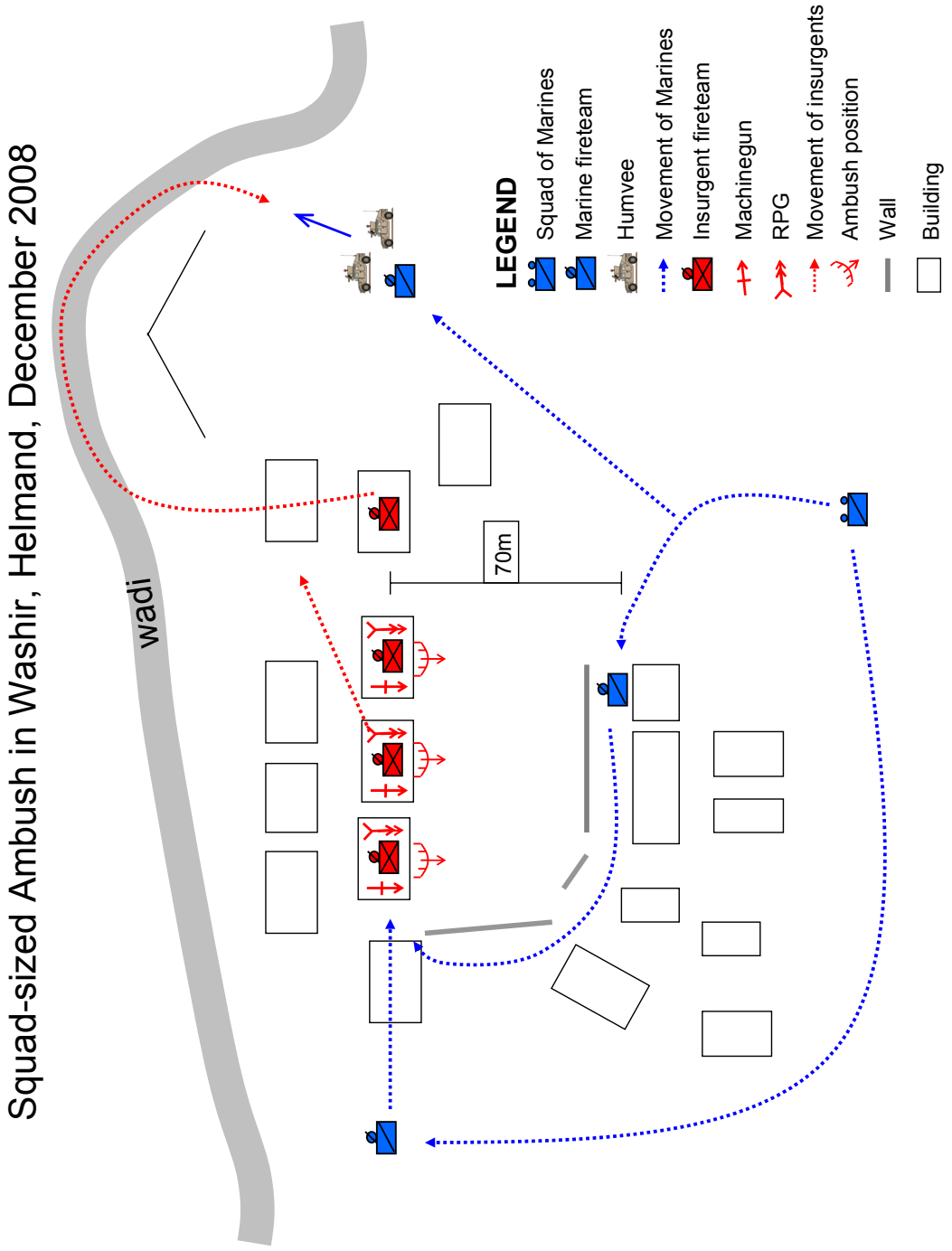
About 500 meters south of Duznow, two teams totaling 15 Marines (about half the platoon) got out of their vehicles and moved on foot off the main road, going west, then north, then east into the village.

A section of attack helicopters then came on station and suppressed the remaining enemy firing positions, allowing the Marines on foot to get out of the village. The two teams then linked up and cleared the rest of the insurgents from the town. The platoon then returned to base.

### Conclusion

In this engagement, the Marines were one step ahead of the insurgents. The incident occurred near the end of the unit's tour in Afghanistan, by which time it was quite familiar with the enemy's tactics.

The insurgents noticed only one team of Marines moving on foot. This second team was able to take the enemy unawares through a flanking attack. Marines in vehicles predicted that the insurgents would attempt to flank by moving east down a wadi, and easily intercepted them.


Squad-sized Ambush in Washir, Helmand, December 2008
wadi
70m
LEGEND
Squad of Marines
Marine fireteam
Humvee
Movement of Marines
Insurgent fireteam
Machinegun
RPG
Movement of insurgents
Ambush position
Wall
Building

# CHAPTER TWO: ATTACKS ON FIXED POSITIONS

Afghan insurgents have targeted numerous fortified positions – sometimes in frontal attacks involving hundreds of fighters, other times using small assault groups. They have also surrounded bases with IEDs and relentlessly targeted supply convoys and helicopters in order to cut off outlying bases from supplies and reinforcements. Afghanistan's many remote patrol bases remain vulnerable to massed attacks, and present daunting logistical challenges.

## Vignette 9: Complex Attacks on Fire Base Chalekor, Zabul, June-July 2006

### Key points

On 5 June and 19 July 2006, insurgents launched several large-scale complex attacks on a fire base near the remote mountain village of Chalekor in Zabul province. In the first attack, insurgents nearly overran the base but were ultimately forced to retreat.

The attacks involved as many as 100 insurgents, most of them from the surrounding area, and were carefully coordinated by a high-level Taliban commander from outside the region. Civilians in the village knew of the attacks in advance and had evacuated the area.

### Background on Fire Base Chalekor

US forces set up Fire Base (FB) Chalekor on 29 May 2006 as an artillery position to facilitate Operation Mountain Thrust during the first two weeks of July.[1]

FB Chalekor was manned by 1st Platoon, Alpha Company, 2nd Battalion, 4th Infantry Regiment, 10th Mountain Division, as well as a platoon of Afghan army. The soldiers at the base had four Humvees, some AT-4s, and two 105mm artillery pieces, only one of which was functional.[2]

The outpost was located at the base of a mountain overlooking Chalekor village on the opposite side of the river. There were mountains on all sides. The position, fortified with sandbags, had no brick-and-mortar structures or HESCO barriers.[3]

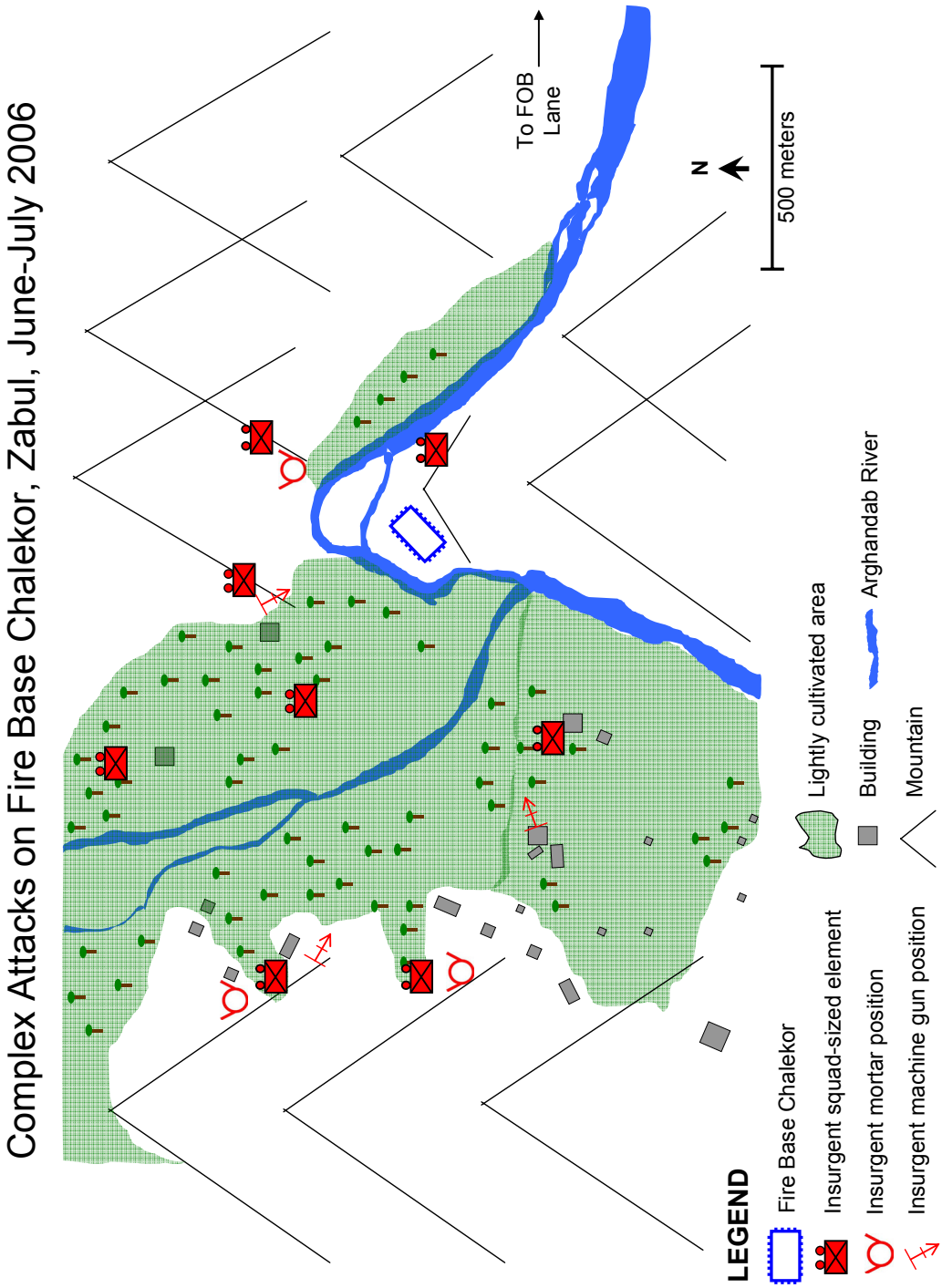
The nearest US forces were a company of troops at FOB Lane, about 12 kilometers east down the Arghandab River, or three hours by road. A high mountain pass separated the area from the battalion headquarters at Qalat, which was a 12-hour drive to the south.

There were reports of numerous Taliban fighters and training camps in and around the Chalekor valley. When soldiers first patrolled into Chalekor village, they found a well-stocked bazaar and fully equipped field hospital apparently used to treat wounded insurgents. In villages nearby, most males of fighting age appeared to be somewhere else.[4]

The two main tribes were the Hotak and the Khakar, both believed to be hostile to Coalition forces. Soldiers of 1st Platoon tried and failed to employ people from the surrounding area to build the fire base. Local leaders refused to meet with US or Afghan army officers.[5]

### First attack on FB Chalekor

On 2 June, ten insurgents armed with RPGs launched a close ambush on a convoy of 1st Platoon as it was returning to base, wounding one US soldier. The attack prompted concerns that a larger attack might be imminent.[6]


Complex Attacks on Fire Base Chalekor, Zabul, June-July 2006
To FOB Lane
N
500 meters
LEGEND
Fire Base Chalekor
Insurgent squad-sized element
Insurgent mortar position
Insurgent machine gun position
Lightly cultivated area
Building
Arghandab River
Mountain

Some time before dawn on 5 June, as many as 100 insurgents took up firing positions surrounding FB Chalekor – some on the high ground at the base of nearby mountains, others in buildings and behind trees in the village.[7]

The insurgents informed the town elders that an attack was imminent, and that the villagers should leave. By dawn, civilians had begun trickling out of the town. Several elders then told the 1st Platoon commander that he and his men should leave immediately.[8] Reports soon came in of IEDs and ambushes along the road between FB Chalekor and the company headquarters at FOB Lane.[9]

About 30 minutes later, as darkness began to fall, insurgents opened fire from eight different directions with recoilless rifles, 7.62mm machine guns, assault rifles, and mortars. Subcommanders in the village below the fire base used referee whistles to coordinate ground movements – frequently ordering subordinates to shift position.[10]

At one point, insurgents came close to breaching the position's northern perimeter. A squad-sized element came within 100 meters of the fire base before being killed.[11]

Soldiers of 1st Platoon and their ANA counterparts responded with small arms fire, 60mm mortars, and 105mm artillery in direct fire mode. They also called in airstrikes. After about 15-20 minutes, the enemy fire slacked off somewhat. After about an hour, B-1 bombers, the only air support available at the time, bombed several enemy positions.[12]

At that point, many insurgents broke contact and fled to the north and west – after reportedly taking heavy losses. Soldiers of 1st Platoon then called in airstrikes along several insurgent exit routes. After about two hours of fighting, the firing stopped.[13]

The next day, 1st Platoon found 20-30 blood trails in and around the village. During the next few weeks, soldiers found 65-70 fresh graves in the area marked with green martyr flags.[14]

**Second attack on the base six weeks later**

For the rest of June and into July, 1st Platoon built three- to four-foot HESCO barriers around the position. The village elders continued to oppose the presence of US soldiers at the fire base. There were also reports of Taliban collecting north of Chalekor.[15]

In mid July, there were reports of insurgents watching Coalition activity around the base – as well as the road from FB Chalekor to FOB Lane – and laying IEDs along the road to the east and south.[16]

On the morning of 19 July, civilians evacuated the village. At dusk, about 150 insurgents opened fire on the fire base from at least eight different directions – this time with heavier weapons, including dozens of mortar rounds from three different locations.

A 75mm recoilless rifle round destroyed one of 1st Platoon's mortars during the first few minutes of the engagement. B-1 bombers arrived immediately and dropped more than 26 bombs on different enemy positions. After about three hours, the insurgents broke contact and fled.[17]

The next day, soldiers found several blood-trails, but no dead or wounded insurgents. Some time later, elders from Chalekor told 1st Platoon that there were about 100 new graves in the area, and that the insurgents were burying their dead at night.[18]

On or about 25 July, a group of village elders told the 1st Platoon commander that they wanted Coalition forces to remain in the town indefinitely and build roads. The elders said that they had changed their minds after the 19 July attack in which many local insurgent leaders had died.

**Conclusion**

The attacks on FB Chalekor are noteworthy for several reasons. First, a senior commander with considerable fighting experience was present in both incidents. This man apparently arrived from outside the area and left immediately once the operation was over. His presence was integral to rallying local fighters and providing command-and-control on the ground.

Second, insurgent sub-commanders in the village below the fire base used referee whistles to communicate with fighters nearby. They may have used the whistles as a way to communicate without revealing their position.

Third, the insurgents were in continuous contact with the village elders, who knew about the attack in advance. Most civilians left the village before the attack began. Fourth, insurgents apparently laid IEDs and small ambushes along the only two routes into and out of the area – thereby slowing quick-reaction forces.

Finally, once many of the local insurgent leaders had died in the second assault, the Chalekor village elders changed their minds about the presence of Coalition forces – apparently because they had become convinced of the strength and commitment of 1st Platoon, or because they were no longer intimidated by the insurgents.

## Vignette 10: Attacks on Now Zad Platoon House, Helmand, July 2006

### Key points

In July 2006, the British platoon house at the Now Zad district center was attacked for 22 days straight – 28 attacks in all. A few lasted as long as six hours. In others, hundreds of Taliban arrayed against British positions. There were also attempts to overrun British positions, though none succeeded.

The insurgents used nearby buildings as firing positions. They used narrow alleyways to creep close to the base's walls during the night. During particularly large attacks, they moved in from multiple directions under the cover of machine gun and RPG fire.

### Attacks on the district center

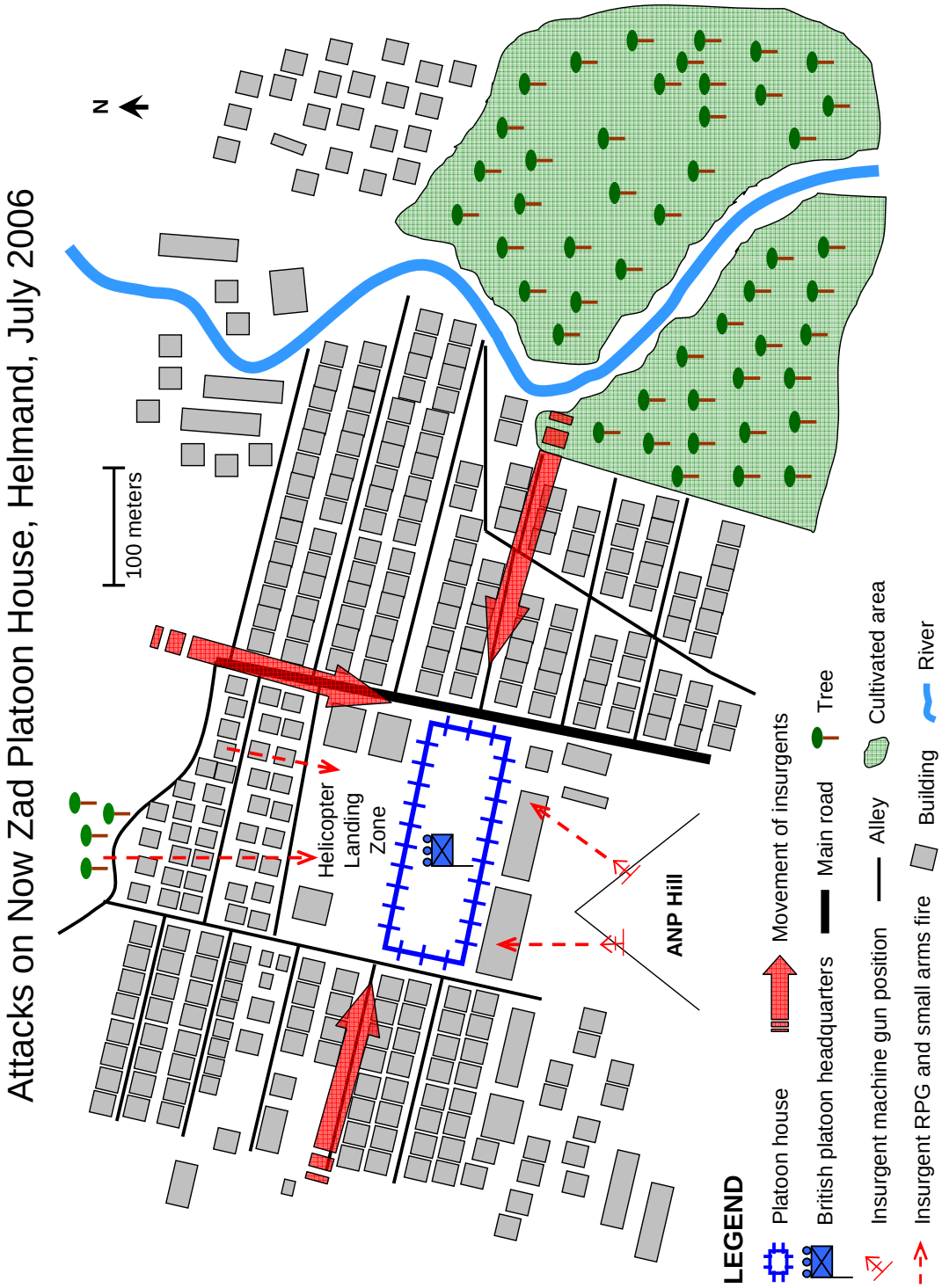
Forty Gurkhas (a reinforced platoon) defended the district center of Now Zad. The town of Now Zad lies along the Helmand River, with hilly terrain to the southwest and east. A road goes through the town, which has a bazaar and a variety of walled compounds. The district center is on the southwest edge of the town, near the bazaar and a variety of buildings. A hill often garrisoned by the ANP, and hence known as ANP Hill, is one kilometer to the south. Twenty ANA accompanied the Gurkhas, and ANP occupied the district center.[19]

A square wall surrounded the district center building. Each side was 200 meters long. Two sangars (an old Indian Army term for a dug-in position) were built along the wall. Each sangar had a dummy position on top. One sangar at the front of the platoon house was manned by Gurkhas – the other, at the back, by ANA.[20]

Over June, the Taliban organized to attack the district center. With only a platoon, the Gurkhas could not patrol throughout the entire town. Insurgents prepared firing positions sited on the district center. People started to flee the town. The British gave the locals flashlights with which to warn them when an attack was coming.

On 1 July, the Gurkha platoon that participated in Operation Mutay was replaced by a new platoon, under the command of Major Dan Rex. The fighting started as soon as the new Gurkha platoon disembarked from Chinook helicopters at the landing zone. This was fairly light fighting, though. It was on 3 July that a major attack occurred.[21]

The attack started when insurgents engaged the front sangar from roughly 30 meters with an RPG. They fired at the dummy position, leaving the Gurkhas below free to return fire. Five Taliban then charged directly at the sangar. A Gurkha with a light machine gun cut short their assault.


Attacks on Now Zad Platoon House, Helmand, July 2006
N
100 meters
Helicopter Landing Zone
ANP Hill
LEGEND
Platoon house
British platoon headquarters
Movement of insurgents
Main road
Tree
Insurgent machine gun position
Alley
Cultivated area
Insurgent RPG and small arms fire
Building
River

At the same time, the Taliban moved against the back position. The Taliban had dug a hole up to the platoon house's perimeter. They snuck up out of the hole and threw grenades at the ANA. The Taliban tried to provide covering fire from ANP Hill, a distant feature. That fire was ineffective. The Gurkhas were able to counterattack and drive back their attackers.[22]

The next day, the British agreed to a truce with the insurgents, which allowed the Taliban to collect their dead. A handful of insurgents came and did so. The Taliban attacked again the next night. The Gurkhas dropped a JDAM on them. [23]

And on it went. As attacks continued, often of a probing nature, the Gurkhas improved their fortifications, building more sangars.

A major attack occurred on 12 July. Early in the morning an ANP patrol intercepted Taliban moving through the town. The Taliban wounded one ANP and forced the rest to withdraw. At nearly the same time the Taliban opened up on the district center from multiple well-prepared positions 200 meters away with RPGs, AK-47s, and machine guns. Some positions were in a tree-line and a building to the north. A-10s and Apaches hit these positions.

The Taliban were not cowed. They withdrew from their positions until air support left, and then returned and re-engaged. The battle wore on for six hours. Two more airstrikes were called in. The high point was when the Taliban coordinated an assault on the district center from three directions. Using covering fire, the Taliban approached to within 50 meters of the district center. RPGs struck the sangars and the district center building itself. Airstrikes and fire from the Gurkhas eventually drove off the Taliban.[24]

The respite was short. The next night (13 July), the Taliban launched anther full-scale assault. The Taliban occupied positions as close as 100 meters from the district center, under the cover of nearby alleyways and buildings. The attack started with a massive amount of fire. RPGs once again struck sangars and the district center building. The Gurkhas turned back one direct assault on a sangar. The main positions were once again to the north. After nearly three hours of fighting, an A-10 hit the northern position, ending the battle.[25]

The Taliban held off until the night of 16 July when insurgents surrounded the compound and hit every sangar. Insurgents got to within 20 yards of the sangars by using dried watercourses to move men and ammunition around the position. The Gurkhas threw 21 grenades before an Apache arrived overhead. According to some reports, the insurgents attempted to use an anti-aircraft gun to shoot down the Apache.[26]

For all intents and purposes, Now Zad was under siege. Between the major attacks, the Gurkhas, ANA, and ANP faced sniper and mortar fire. The snipers would take positions two rooms back in any building and cut holes through walls to conceal their location. At least three mortar teams fired on the district center and ANP Hill. Shooting against the

latter was particularly accurate. Two of the mortars were destroyed by US airstrikes, but a third kept up the fire until a British machine-gunner located it and shot it up.

On 17 July, reinforcements arrived – an additional platoon, a mortar section, and two machinegun teams. They took position on ANP Hill. A sniper was also flown in to hit back at the Taliban snipers.[27] With this increased weight of fire, the Taliban could no longer get so close to the district center. On 22 July, they tried ANP Hill instead but to little avail. This was the last major attack.

The British estimated that 100 Taliban were killed during the entire period of fighting. The British themselves suffered five casualties.[28]

**Conclusion**

The attacks on the Now Zad district center highlighted several aspects of insurgent tactics. First, the insurgents once again demonstrated excellent use of cover and concealment and an ability to use fire and movement. Their RPG fire was accurate and helped other fighters move into close positions.

They also understood how to get out of the way of Coalition air power yet keep on fighting. The Taliban never had the firepower to actually overrun a position, though. In later years, this caused them to abandon frontal assaults and turn to stand-off attacks in which they did not abandon the protection of cover.

## Vignette 11: Attack on FOB Robinson near Sangin, Helmand, April 2008

### Key points

The tactics witnessed around Now Zad would be seen again and again throughout Helmand. From 2006 to 2008, the Taliban showed themselves to be skilled in several aspects of small unit tactics. Most of all, their field craft was superb.

The lush Helmand River valley proved surprisingly fertile ground for guerrilla tactics. The insurgents used two-meter-high poppy fields, orchards, thick mud walls, and a system of interlocking canals and irrigation ditches for cover and concealment. Near the river, British patrols could see no further than 100 meters.

The insurgents waited for British patrols to get within a few meters and then spring an ambush. Sometimes they hid in irrigation ditches or a poppy fields until a patrol passed, and then attacked from behind.

The terrain was also a means of masking flanking movements, a frequent insurgent tactic.[29] The Taliban used irrigation ditches and canals to outflank or encircle the British. On foot, they easily outdistanced the gear-laden British.[30]

The terrain dictated very close-in fighting. Unlike in northeastern Afghanistan, where engagement ranges tended to exceed 400 meters, in Helmand (based on interviews) they tended to fall under 200 meters. AH-64 Apache attack helicopters often fired at targets within 150 meters of British troops (danger-close).

British officers described Taliban discipline under fire as “phenomenal.” They held position against mortar and artillery fire. Even 30mm gunfire from an Apache attack helicopter did not always cause the Taliban to flee. They often just stayed under cover.[31]

### Attack on FOB Robinson

The British fought countless engagements with the Taliban between the summer of 2006 and the end of 2008. An entire insurgent attack could involve 50 insurgents. The insurgents usually divided themselves into teams of four to six fighters.[32]

British outposts were frequent targets. One of these, FOB Robinson in Sangin district near the Helmand River, was the subject of many attacks. One attack, in April 2008, illustrates well how the Taliban used the terrain around the river for cover and concealment.

April is poppy harvesting time in Helmand. During this month, fighting can be somewhat reduced because Afghan men are paid to harvest poppy. The soldiers stationed at FOB Robinson had seen no fighting that month. FOB Robinson was held by a British company-sized unit, a US Special Forces detachment, British logistics and engineering elements, and an ANA platoon.

In early April, a MEDCAP, planned by the US Special Forces, took place at the front gate of FOB Robinson. It was meant to provide medical care to locals, who could walk in from the villages.

At the time of the incident the Royal Marines were taking over control of FOB Robinson from a company from 2nd Battalion, the Parachute Regiment (2nd Paras). A mixture of both units was at the base. No one was on patrol. In addition to these infantry, the British logistic and engineering elements, US Special Forces detachment, and the ANA platoon were present. The 30 men of the ANA platoon were outside the gate monitoring the MEDCAP.

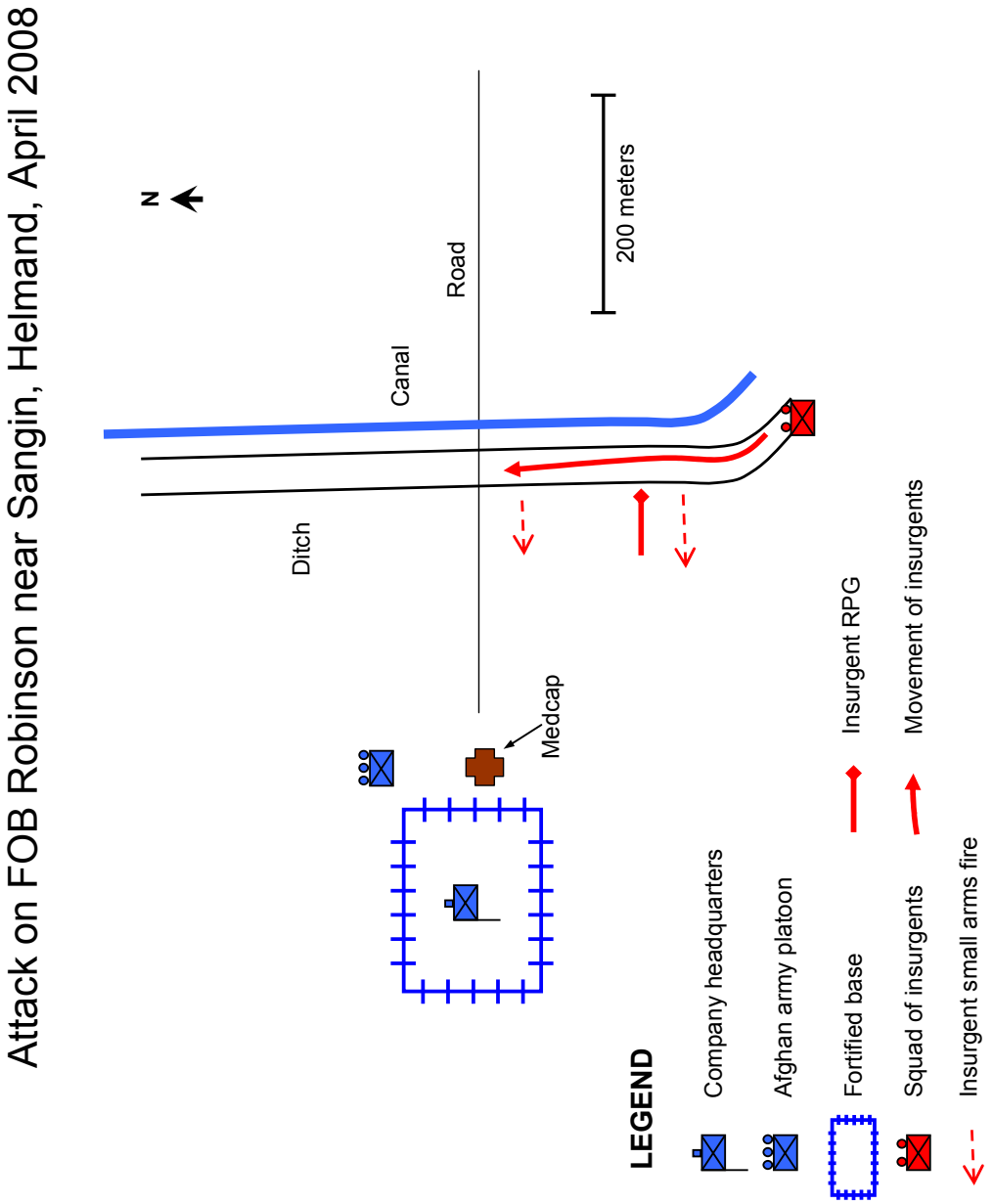
Despite the poppy harvest, the insurgents decided this would be an opportune moment to attack – either because Afghan soldiers from the base would be outside and vulnerable or because an attack would remind civilians not to work with the British or the Afghan government. FOB Robinson was essentially a large square. Fortifications were HESCO barriers, old compound walls, and barbed wire. Outside the front gate, a canal ran past the FOB with a raised towpath on the far side. Around the canal were trees. A dirt road ran over the canal to the front gate of the FOB.

The insurgents waited to act until the MEDCAP was in full swing. Six to seven insurgents with RPGs, light machineguns, and Kalashnikovs snuck up to a man-made ditch that ran parallel to the tow path for the canal. The ditch was 200 meters from the British defenses. It is believed that locals attending the MEDCAP saw what was happening. They started to disperse. A few warned the British and US troops that an attack was imminent. Thirty seconds later, at roughly 11:00 am the insurgents opened fire with a volley of nine to ten RPGs. One struck a vehicle. Fortunately, no one was injured.

Between the Paras, US Special Forces, and the Afghan soldiers, the response to the Taliban attack was chaotic. Everyone started returning fire, obeying their own rules of engagement.

The insurgents' use of cover and concealment was good. They used the trees and dead ground to great effect. It was difficult for the British, American, and Afghan soldiers to make out targets, and no one could confirm that any insurgents were being hit, though they suspected that at least one insurgent had been injured.

After the initial volley, insurgents fired machine guns and Kalashnikovs, interspersed with more RPGs. Overall, their fire was pretty inaccurate. None of the defenders were injured. The firefight lasted 15 minutes. The weight of US and British fire was huge. Eventually, it caused to insurgents to withdraw.


Attack on FOB Robinson near Sangin, Helmand, April 2008
N
200 meters
Road
Canal
Ditch
Medcap
LEGEND
Company headquarters
Afghan army platoon
Fortified base
Squad of insurgents
Insurgent small arms fire
Insurgent RPG
Movement of insurgents

**Conclusion**

The attack had no long-term impact on British or Afghan operations. No British, Afghans, or Taliban were injured. It is believed that one civilian was killed in the crossfire, although no body was found and no plea for compensation was made. Reports suggested that one insurgent was seriously injured, but this could not be confirmed.

All in all, the attack was another example of the difficulties of identifying and engaging Taliban in the Helmand River valley. It was also another example of superb Taliban fieldcraft. They used the ditch to get into position undetected, and then used it and the trees as concealment. Once confronted with an overwhelming response, they utilized the terrain to escape as well.

## Vignette 12: Encirclement of Patrol Base Armagh, Helmand, Summer 2008

### Key points

In early July 2008, a British infantry company based in Sangin set up a patrol base south of the town, along a major insurgent transit route. Within days, the insurgents attacked the outpost, known as Patrol Base Armagh, and attempted to cut it off from the company headquarters downtown.

They laid IEDs along the outpost's supply routes and harassed its troops by firing small arms and RPGs from different directions. The insurgents managed to pin British forces down in the outpost and move around the position to the south.

The attacks on Patrol Base Armagh are notable because, rather than attempting to overrun the outpost in a direct assault, the insurgents cut its resupply and tied down its troops – eventually forcing the British to close the base.

### Insurgents encircle Patrol Base Armagh

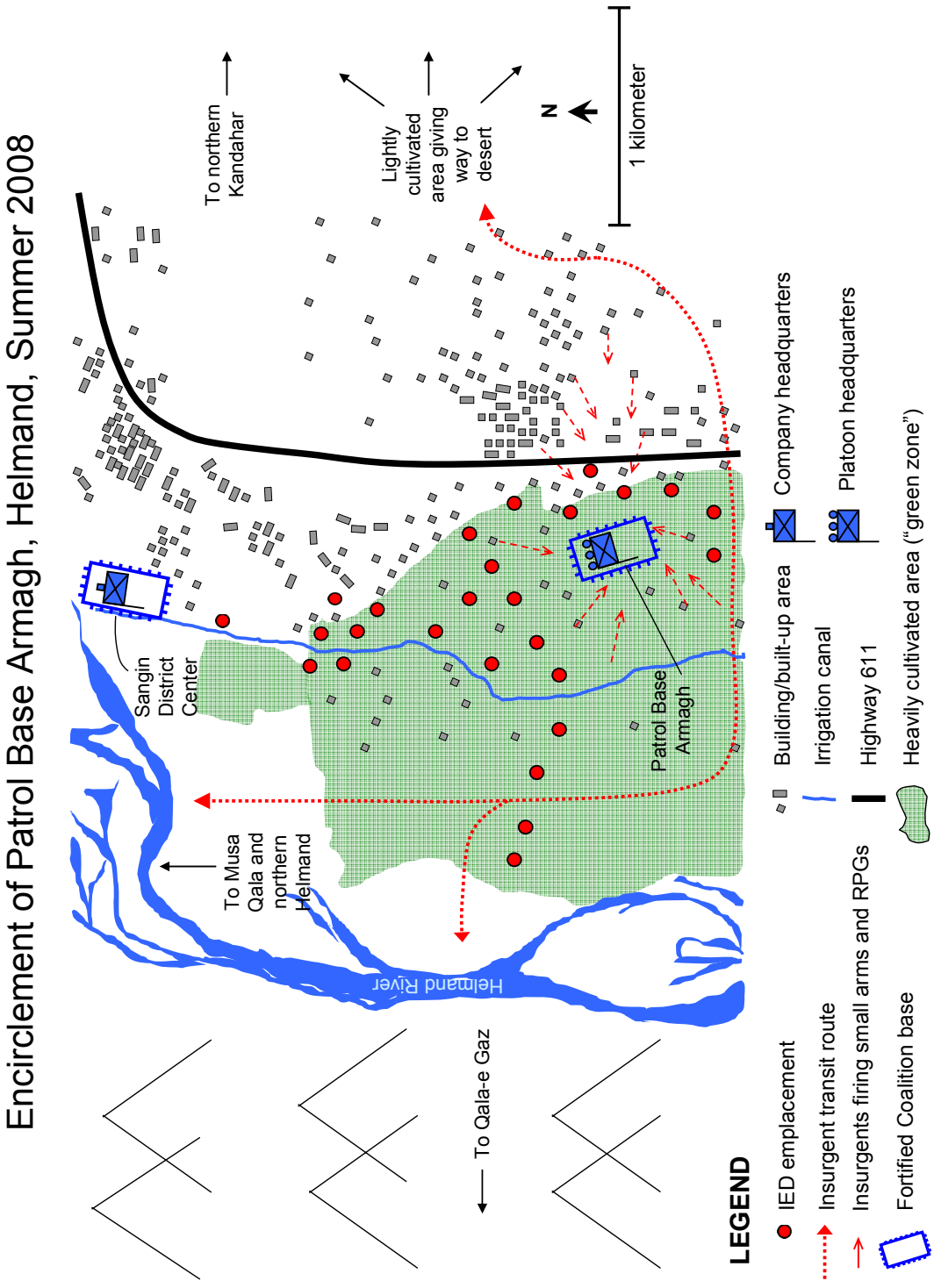
On or around 11 July 2008, two platoons of Ranger Company, 1st Battalion, Royal Irish Regiment (1RIR) established a patrol base two kilometers south of their main base at the Sangin District Center. The outpost was located on the eastern edge of a lush, heavily cultivated area known as the "green zone".[33]

The purpose of the position, later called Patrol Base Armagh, was to stop the movement of insurgents and IED facilitators transiting between Kandahar and Pakistan to the east, and northern Helmand and Qala-e Gaz to the west. Several Afghan army checkpoints along Highway 611 kept most insurgents off the main road around Sangin, forcing them to move by foot through the green zone along the Helmand River.

Patrol Base Armagh was surrounded by open fields. Numerous buildings were scattered within 500 meters on all sides, and several orchards and tree lines were nearby. The base had been a former Taliban safe house, and was already heavily fortified.

Within days, insurgents began laying IEDs along the main routes connecting the outpost to the main base in downtown Sangin. They then fired small arms and RPGs at the base from various buildings nearby, most of them from the east. These attacks occurred at least every few days. The insurgents also ambushed patrols attempting to resupply the outpost and clear IEDs en route.

Most attacks on the patrol base involved a heavy burst of accurate RPG fire, followed by less-accurate small arms fire. The insurgents then broke contact and abandoned their positions. They often fired from the same buildings or concealed positions. The insurgents attacked in 3-6 three-man teams spread out in different firing locations. If one man was injured or killed, the other two men evacuated the casualty.


Encirclement of Patrol Base Armagh, Helmand, Summer 2008
To northern Kandahar
Lightly cultivated area giving way to desert
N
1 kilometer
Sangin District Center
Patrol Base Armagh
To Musa Qala and northern Helmand
Helmand River
To Qala-e Gaz
LEGEND
IED emplacement
Insurgent transit route
Insurgents firing small arms and RPGs
Fortified Coalition base
Building/built-up area
Irrigation canal
Highway 611
Heavily cultivated area ("green zone")
Company headquarters
Platoon headquarters

Throughout this period, the insurgents made threatening statements over their radios, knowing that the troops at the base were listening. For example, they would exaggerate their numbers or say that a suicide bomber was on his way.

When moving a lot of men or material into or out of the green zone, the insurgents laid multiple IEDs the night before to slow reinforcements out of the district center. They then fixed the troops at the patrol base through a sustained attack from multiple directions, while facilitators moved around the outpost to the immediate south.

Most of the mines laid between the district center and the patrol base were command-wire or pressure plate IEDs. Many were buried in the soft ground along footpaths, which required daily clearing missions that were slow and painstaking – keeping British troops from doing clearing or disruption operations around Patrol Base Armagh.

Several IED cells were reportedly based in a wadi near the outpost. Soldiers of 1RIR conducted several missions against these cells, but were not able to push them out of the area.

**1RIR closes the patrol base**

There was only one company of troops based in Sangin, with responsibility for the town of 60,000 and its surrounding area. The company had three platoons and a fire support group. Initially, 1RIR had sent two platoons to man Patrol Base Armagh, but later recalled one back to the district center, leaving only one platoon to guard the outpost.

The British eventually closed the patrol base in mid August, about a month after setting it up. Their main reason was that there were insufficient resources to clear IEDs along the route to the outpost, which made it impossible to adequately re-supply the position. During the month that the outpost was operational, insurgents laid more than 90 IEDs along its supply routes. There was also concern that with only one platoon at the patrol base, it was in danger of being overrun.

After the base was closed, there was a substantial fall in the amount of intelligence coming in about insurgent activity south of Sangin. There was also a significant increase in the number of attacks on Afghan army checkpoints along Highway 611 and in downtown Sangin.

**Conclusion**

The attacks on Patrol Base Armagh in the summer of 2008 demonstrated that the insurgents around Sangin were capable of thinking strategically and focusing substantial effort on protecting a key transit route.

The insurgents succeeded in encircling the base, tying down one of 1RIR's three platoons in constant counter-IED missions, and fixing another platoon inside the outpost. That left 1RIR with only one platoon left to protect its headquarters at the district center and do occasional patrols downtown.

During the short time that the base was operational, it was effective at disrupting the insurgents' freedom of movement, bringing in actionable intelligence, and taking pressure off Afghan army checkpoints on the roads into Sangin. Yet, there were not enough troops to keep it operational.

The insurgents did not attempt to overrun the base, nor did they appear focused on causing casualties through IED strikes. The attacks served more as a diversion to prevent British forces from interdicting movement south of Patrol Base Armagh.

## Vignette 13: Assault on Sarpoza Prison, Kandahar City, June 2008

### Key points

On the night of 13 June 2008, as many as 50 insurgents attacked Sarpoza Prison on the outskirts of Kandahar city, breaching the wall and freeing some 1,000 prisoners, 400 of whom were suspected insurgents, including some high-level commanders.

At about 9:30 pm, insurgents detonated a large tanker truck full of explosives at the front gate of the prison, blowing an enormous hole in the outer wall. A suicide bomber also blew a hole in the back wall of the prison. Insurgents on motorcycles then rushed in and freed the prisoners, split them into groups, and helped them get away safely.

Prior to the attack, the Taliban had warned nearby civilians, most of whom left the area. Insurgents also targeted at least two police checkpoints shortly before the assault in order to tie the police down and prevent them from responding to the prison break.

### Complex attack on prison

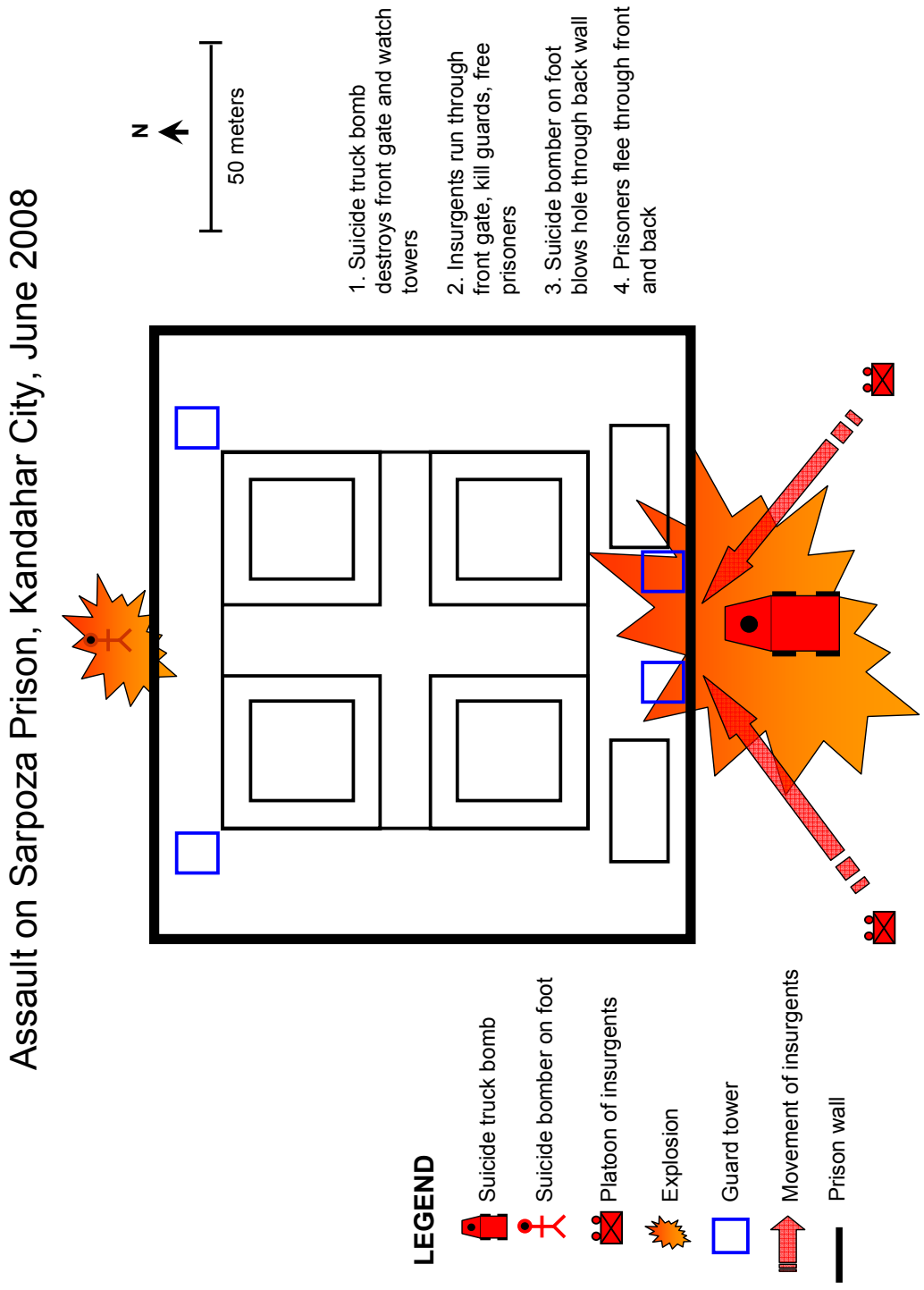
For over a month before the attack on 13 June, a group of seven insurgent leaders inside Sarpoza Prison met every evening to discuss plans for the assault. They communicated with commanders outside through contraband cell phones. The insurgents may have cut a deal with the prison warden. On 5 June, they poisoned a number of guards and prison staff.

On 12 June, the day before the attack, insurgents quietly warned nearby civilians that an attack was coming, and suggested they leave the area without informing the police. The civilians complied. Word of the attack did not reach the police, the army, or Canadian forces in downtown Kandahar.[34]

The following evening at about 9:10 pm, as the prison guards got ready to lock the inmates in their cells, insurgents attacked the two nearest police positions: the Dand Chowk checkpoint, about 600 meters east of the prison, and the Gendama police barracks 2,200 kilometers to the west.

A few minutes later, a would-be suicide bomber drove a tanker full of explosives to the front gate of the prison. The driver tried to detonate the explosives with a switch, which turned out to be faulty. Visibly nervous, he then got out of the vehicle and ran away. Guards in the prison watch towers fired at the man as he fled.[35]

Insurgents hiding in the darkness nearby then fired several RPGs at the truck, detonating the explosives. The massive blast destroyed the front gate and wall, which was made of dried mud. It also demolished two watch towers, killing at least four guards instantly and wounding many more. A few minutes later, a suicide bomber on foot blew a hole in the back wall of the prison.


Assault on Sarpoza Prison, Kandahar City, June 2008
N
50 meters
1. Suicide truck bomb destroys front gate and watch towers
2. Insurgents run through front gate, kill guards, free prisoners
3. Suicide bomber on foot blows hole through back wall
4. Prisoners flee through front and back
LEGEND
Suicide truck bomb
Suicide bomber on foot
Platoon of insurgents
Explosion
Guard tower
Movement of insurgents
Prison wall

Insurgents then charged through the debris, killing additional prison staff with RPGs, grenades, and small arms. 15 of the prison's 30 guards were killed in the assault.

The insurgents went first to the national security wing, which housed about 400 suspected Taliban. They shot the locks off the doors with a belt-fed machine gun. They then freed another 600 prisoners. Police stationed nearby, many of them under fire from insurgents, did not respond.[36]

**Prisoners successfully flee the area**

The attackers distributed cell phones to freed Taliban prisoners. Several dozen, including some high-level insurgent commanders, escaped in waiting minibuses and other vehicles parked outside the prison. Other Taliban prisoners escaped on foot.

The attackers split the rest of the prisoners into groups of 100 and 200 and guided them on foot in different directions through vineyards and orchards beyond the prison walls. They escaped without facing any resistance. Some spent the night undetected as close as two kilometers from the prison.[37]

The Canadian quick-reaction force at Camp Nathan Smith in downtown Kandahar did not reach the prison until almost two hours after the attack began. By the time the troops arrived, all but a few prisoners were gone. They searched the area all that night and the next day, but captured only a handful of prisoners.[38]

Most of the freed insurgents went to the Panjwayi valley southwest of the city, where insurgents provided them with medical treatment, money, and supplies. The escaped prisoners then scattered in different directions.[39]

Many travelled north of Kandahar city where they joined with several hundred Taliban, who then took over 10 villages in Kandahar's Arghandab district on 16 June.[40] The insurgents later withdrew after suffering heavy casualties.[41]

**Conclusion**

The Sarpoza Prison break was one of the largest and most sophisticated attacks to date in Afghanistan. Insurgents used two suicide bombers to blow holes in the front and back walls of the prison, before launching a ground assault and evacuating an estimated 1,000 prisoners in a disciplined fashion.

Insurgent leaders inside the prison played a key role in planning and coordinating the attack, using cell phones to communicate with their comrades outside. These commanders may have negotiated with the prison warden, who allegedly played a role in delaying the response of the police and Canadian forces.

The attackers managed to warn nearby civilians ahead of time without the police learning of the impending operation. The insurgents also attacked nearby police posts to prevent Afghan security forces from responding to the prison assault.

The attack was extraordinarily successful. The insurgents took no casualties, and all but a few Taliban prisoners escaped unharmed.

# CHAPTER THREE: DEFENSIVE ENGAGEMENTS

Like any army, the Taliban has relied on base areas to store weapons, provide medical care to wounded fighters, plan new attacks, and serve as launching pads for operations further afield. Insurgents frequently tried to defend these bases – and, when overrun, to make holding them prohibitively costly for the Coalition. When surrounded, Afghan insurgents escaped using maneuver, cover-fire, and various terrain features to their advantage. While protecting high-level commanders, they frequently stood and fought, even against impossible odds.

## Vignette 14: Defense of Insurgent Leader in Bulac Kalay, Zabul, May 2005

### Key points

On the morning of 3 May 2005, a squad of US soldiers and Afghan police ran into 70 or more heavily armed insurgents near the remote village of Bulac Kalay in northern Zabul province, sparking a fierce battle that lasted through the day and into the night.

The insurgents were guarding several high-level Taliban commanders. The fighters stood their ground through repeated airstrikes and ground assaults in order to allow their leaders to escape south down the river.

They did so by firing RPGs and machine guns from entrenched positions in an orchard and by climbing onto the high ground nearby. They nearly shot down a Coalition helicopter carrying reinforcements, forcing it to land on the opposite side of the river. They then rushed to destroy the only nearby bridge.

Only a handful surrendered, most of them seriously wounded. The rest died in airstrikes and close combat in the orchard.

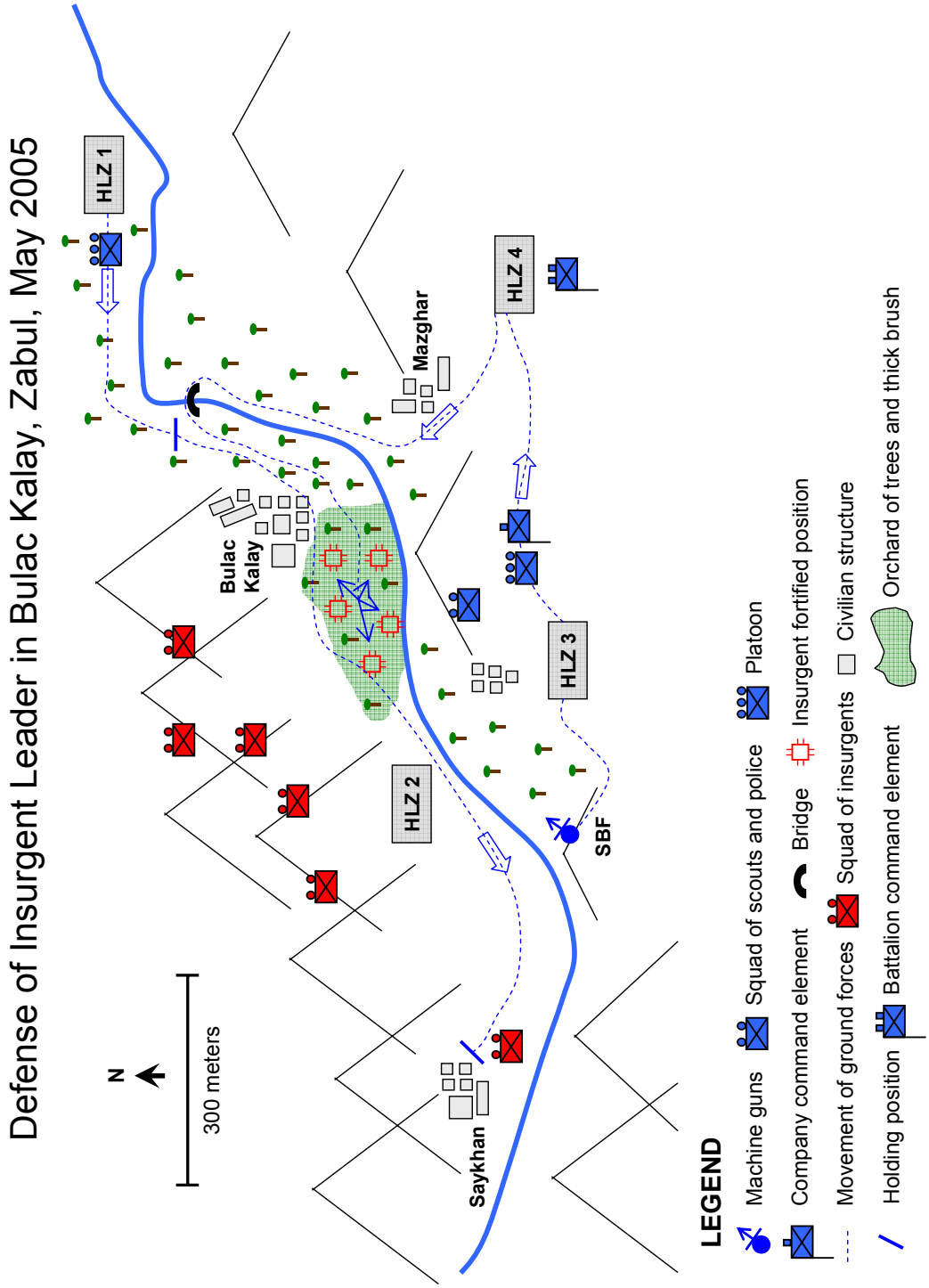
### Routine patrol runs into large, heavily armed Taliban force

At around 4:45 am on 3 May 2005, a squad of 15 Afghan police and eight scouts from 2nd Battalion, 503rd Parachute Infantry Regiment (2/503), 173rd Airborne Brigade were moving south parallel to the Arghandab River north of Bulac Kalay, on a mounted patrol.[1]

Around the same time, several high-level Taliban commanders guarded by 70 or more insurgents were moving north up the river. They conscripted some young men along the way and gave them rifles.[2] They also captured a local man, roughed him up, and attached a note to his body threatening similar punishment to anyone who attended the local school.[3] The group stopped in the village of Bulac Kalay, set up various fire positions, and held a meeting.[4]

Bulac Kalay was a small village of some 20 mud compounds spread over three settlements along the Arghandab River, about 100 kilometers north of Qalat, the Zabul provincial capital. The buildings were surrounded by thick orchards on terraced ground. The river, which was about 50-75 meters wide, flowed north to south, its current fast from snowmelt during the spring and summer. Bulac Kalay was a remote village far from any district center; soldiers from the 2/503 had never been there before.

The squad drove south down a dirt track and stopped near the village of Mazghar, a small cluster of four or five mud compounds, shortly before 6:00 am. The eight Coalition soldiers took up over-watch positions on two hills about 150 meters to the north and south.[5]


Defense of Insurgent Leader in Bulac Kalay, Zabul, May 2005
HLZ 1
HLZ 2
HLZ 3
HLZ 4
Bulac Kalay
Mazghar
Saykhan
SBF
N
300 meters
LEGEND
Machine guns
Squad of scouts and police
Platoon
Company command element
Bridge
Insurgent fortified position
Movement of ground forces
Squad of insurgents
Civilian structure
Holding position
Battalion command element
Orchard of trees and thick brush

As the police neared the buildings, the insurgents launched a heavy volley of highly accurate small arms and RPG fire from concealed positions in a large orchard on the other side of the river, about 200-300 meters to the west – killing or wounding most of the police. The soldiers in over-watch positions fired back, killing or wounding several insurgents. They also called for air support and a quick-reaction force.[6]

The insurgents then directed their fire at the Coalition soldiers perched on the hills above the buildings, and moved to surround them – a few coming as close as 100 meters. Some insurgents also climbed onto the high ground above Bulac Kalay.[7] They moved fast, as they were accustomed to the terrain and unencumbered by body-armor or supplies.

The bulk of the insurgent force remained in fortified positions inside the orchard north of the river where they had PKM and RPK machine guns, RPGs, and large amounts of ammunition.[8]

The insurgents destroyed one of the scouts' Humvees after hitting it multiple times with RPGs. The soldier manning the Humvee turret managed to get out safely.[9] The scouts fought for nearly 90 minutes until Coalition helicopters arrived with more troops and close air support.[10]

In the meantime, the high-level Taliban commanders snuck out of Bulac Kalay and jumped into the river, drifting south with the current to a village 10-12 kilometers away. The rest of the insurgents remained behind to hold off and distract the squad of Coalition soldiers and their reinforcements.[11]

**Coalition reinforcements arrive, close on insurgent positions**

At about 7:30 am, Coalition aircraft strafed the area just north of Mazghar. They then made additional passes over the orchard on the opposite side of the river. The squad of scouts climbed down to a safer location behind a large hill to the southwest.[12]

At 8:00 am, Coalition helicopters picked up about 60 soldiers of 3rd Platoon and its command element from Chosen Company, 2/503 at their base near Qalat and flew them to the Bulac Kalay area.[13] 3rd Platoon landed north of the Bulac Kalay Bridge on the insurgents' side of the river (shown on map as HLZ 1). The mission of 3rd Platoon was to attack south and block insurgents escaping north.[14]

Another helicopter carrying the company command element and machine gunners from 3rd Platoon attempted to land near the southwest corner of the orchard (shown on map as HLZ 2). The insurgents in the orchard fired on the helicopter once it reached an altitude of about 30 meters. An RPG struck the tail of the helicopter, sending it into a spin. The pilot regained control, flew out of range, and landed south of the river (shown on map as HLZ 3).[15]

The machine-gunners set up a support-by-fire position about 800 meters southwest of the orchard on a hilltop on the opposite side of the river (shown on map as SBF).[16] It was a rocky, exposed position, but had an open field of fire onto the southwest corner of the orchard and onto the only path out of the orchard to the south.[17] From there the machine gunners were able to cut off the insurgents' last remaining exit route.[18]

Many of the insurgents tried desperately to flee south, but were stopped by the heavy volume of machine gun fire. They pleaded repeatedly with their counterparts on the high ground to destroy the SBF position.[19]

Insurgents on the high ground maneuvered around the mountain to the west and bombarded the machine gun position, wounding several soldiers.[20] Insurgents spread out in other locations above the town fired on several helicopters south of the river. At about 9:40 am, Coalition aircraft made several passes along the ridgeline, killing some insurgents in these exposed positions. Yet, insurgent fire from the mountainside continued.[21]

In the meantime, the company commander and his team moved to the scouts' position about a kilometer to the northeast.[22] They linked up with the scouts, and at 9:43 am moved through the cluster of buildings known as Mazghar village, where the patrol had first taken fire about four hours before.[23]

The team moved west towards the river and then north. At this point, the US forces on the ground were not yet sure where the bulk of insurgents were located.[24]

The insurgents spotted the soldiers moving towards the river. A small group of Taliban broke away from the orchard and rushed north in order to destroy the only nearby bridge and prevent the rest of the soldiers from crossing over. The move, if successful, would have isolated 3rd Platoon south of HLZ 1.[25]

The company commander and his team saw the insurgents rushing north, and soon realized what they were up to. The soldiers rushed towards the bridge along the east side of the river, racing the Taliban on the west side, while both sides exchanged fire. At the same time, the commander radioed 3rd Platoon and ordered them to move south to secure the bridge.[26]

The soldiers of 3rd Platoon reached the bridge minutes before the insurgents arrived. The insurgents got as close as 50 meters before 3rd Platoon killed two of their men in a fierce firefight. The rest fled back to the orchard.[27]

The bridge secured, the company commander and his team met with reinforcements from 1st Platoon near HLZ 4 at about 10:30 am. Both then moved to the bridge, crossed the river, and linked up with 3rd Platoon. The company commander and 1st Platoon then pushed south. As they did so, they came under increasing fire from the mountainside above.[28]

As the team reached the cluster of buildings known as Bulac Kalay village, an insurgent fired an RPG from less than 150 meters away, then dropped the weapon and disappeared. The platoon caught up with the man near a small compound and found him nonchalantly raking some dirt. The soldiers searched nearby buildings but found nothing.[29]

Then, at about 11:30 am, 1st Platoon pushed south towards the orchard, leaving a squad from 3rd Platoon to guard the houses just cleared. In the meantime, insurgents on the mountainside intensified their fire on the machine gunners southwest of the orchard on the opposite side of the river, bracketing their position and wounding one soldier.[30]

As 1st Platoon neared the insurgents' main positions, three soldiers were wounded. The team halted briefly near a wall. They were separated from the orchard by about 75 meters of open field. They set up some machine gun positions to support their advance, and evacuated their wounded. They then rushed across the open field and into the thick brush of the orchard.[31]

The platoon cleared the orchard after fierce fighting in close quarters. One soldier snuck up on eight insurgents behind a stone wall, killing all of them. More insurgents were killed by grenades and small arms fire from as close as a few meters away. In all, the soldiers killed as many as 29 fighters in the orchard.[32]

Once the insurgents on the mountainside realized that most of their comrades were dead or captured, they stopped firing and fled, many of them around the mountain to the southwest. They then took cover in a wooded area near a village called Saykhan just down the river.[33]

The soldiers of 3rd Platoon, which had been guarding the bridge and the main buildings of Bulac Kalay pursued the few remaining insurgents and set up over-watch positions above the village some time in the late afternoon. From there they directed airstrikes against the few remaining insurgents.[34]

The next day, the company collected weapons and captured several wounded insurgents. They also air-assaulted into several nearby villages and searched for Taliban who had escaped. In all, the soldiers killed or captured as many as 60 insurgents. By the morning of 5 May, the remaining US forces had returned to base.[35]

**Conclusion**

The Bulac Kalay incident stands out because the insurgents held their ground. Most of them fought to the death in order to allow their leaders to escape. The battle demonstrates that the Taliban do not always use hit-and-run tactics. When protecting high-level commanders, Afghan insurgents may dig in against all odds.

It is possible that many insurgents attempted to flee some hours into the battle once their leaders had floated far enough down the river. They were not able to, because 3rd Platoon had blocked both their egress routes. Yet, even when it was clear that they were out-gunned and out-manned with no hope of escape, the insurgents did not surrender.

Some of the insurgents at Bulac Kalay were young local men with little military experience; however, the mass of the force was made up of hardened, well-trained fighters armed with heavy weapons and large amounts of ammunition.

The Taliban force exploited every aspect of the terrain – including the river, the thick brush of the orchard, and the high ground above the village. They also recognized the importance of destroying the bridge once they realized that most of the US forces had landed on the opposite side of the river.

The insurgents used fire and maneuver, blocking positions, and cover fire. They tried to flank Coalition positions by climbing on the high ground and moving east and west. They

also used RPGs in an attempt to shoot down helicopters, patiently waiting until the aircraft were close to the ground.[36]

Close air support was decisive in dislodging the insurgents from the high ground above the village. Many of those wounded in the engagement were hit from these positions.[37] Yet, the mass of the force was concentrated in the thick brush of the orchard, where airpower was less effective. In the end, it was infantry on foot that cleared the area bunker by bunker.

## Vignette 15: Defense Against Encirclement, Chalbar, Kandahar, June 2005

### Key points

Throughout 2005, the paratroopers of Chosen Company, 2nd Battalion, 503rd Infantry air-assaulted into remote areas in Kandahar and Zabul provinces in an effort to flush insurgents out of their mountain sanctuaries. Usually, the insurgents fled. Yet, they also stood their ground on occasion, especially when surrounded.

One such incident occurred in the mountains of northeast Kandahar on 21 June 2005, when a group of 150 or more insurgents attacked a platoon of Chosen Company troops patrolling north of the Mienashin district center, near what appeared to have been an important insurgent base camp. Additional troops soon landed to reinforce the platoon and cut off the insurgents' escape routes.

Rather than surrender, the insurgents attempted to fight their way out. For eight hours, they fired from dug-in positions on a mountain, from wheat fields, and from a village below with women and children nearby. They took cover from US airstrikes by hiding beneath large boulders on the side of the mountain.

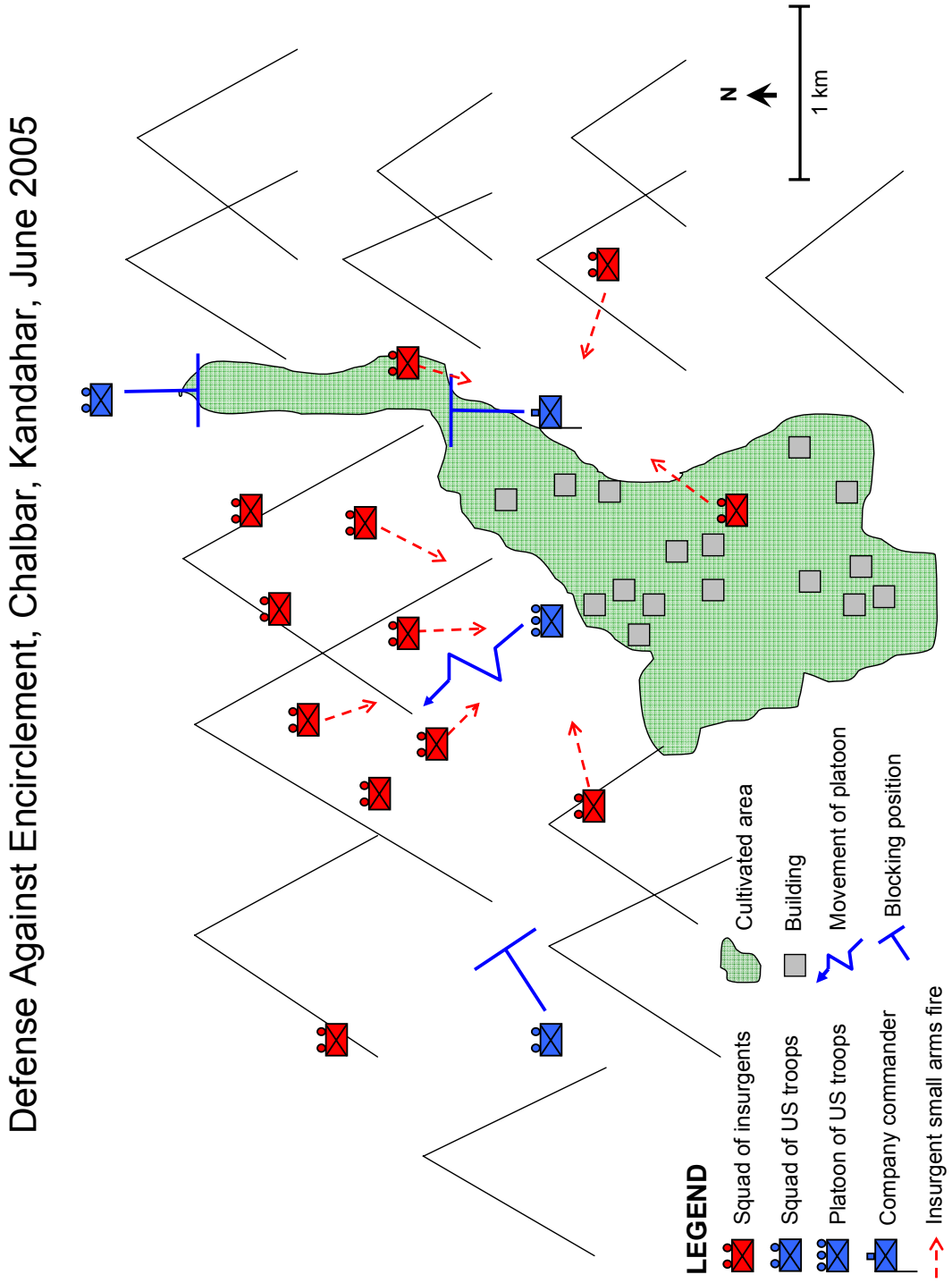
The insurgents attacked the platoon without knowing that it was part of a larger, company-sized force of paratroopers located only minutes away by helicopter. Had the insurgents known, they would have left the platoon alone and melted away.

### Ambush of platoon

On 21 June 2005, Chosen Company, 2nd Battalion, 503rd Infantry, 173rd Airborne Brigade flew by helicopter to the Mienashin district center in northeast Kandahar. Their mission was to re-establish the Mienashin district leadership after hearing reports that the Taliban had kidnapped the district governor and police chief and taken several policemen hostage.[38] There were also reports that a local Afghan army commander had defected and joined the insurgent force.[39]

When the company arrived at Temur Kalay, where the district center was located, the soldiers found that the mosque and police station had been burned and several villagers badly beaten. The paratroopers learned that the insurgents had only recently left the district center and were moving north up the valley.[40]

The company commander sent 2nd Platoon north up the valley to find the insurgents. As the platoon entered the mud-walled village of Chalbar north of the district center, insurgents moving on the high ground above the town surrounded the patrol and pinned it down with heavy fire. The platoon took cover near some buildings in a wheat field.[41]


Defense Against Encirclement, Chalbar, Kandahar, June 2005
N
1 km
LEGEND
Squad of insurgents
Squad of US troops
Platoon of US troops
Company commander
Insurgent small arms fire
Cultivated area
Building
Movement of platoon
Blocking position

2nd Platoon then regrouped and climbed up the mountain, where the bulk of the insurgents were fighting from dug-in positions behind large rocks. In the process, the platoon came under heavy fire from as close as 50 meters; several soldiers were wounded.[42]

**Defense against encirclement**

Helicopters air-dropped additional forces in blocking positions north and south along the valley and on the rear side of the mountain, where many of the insurgents were located. An additional platoon moved north by road.[43]

The company command element took cover behind a building in the village. It took continual fire, some of it from a house on the outskirts of the village with several women and children walking around outside. In the midst of the fighting, an old man delivered tea to the soldiers in the village, but was told to get back inside. Several villagers tended their wheat fields nearby.[44]

As 2nd Platoon moved up the mountain, many of the insurgents retreated. As they did so, they fought fiercely against the advancing platoon. Attack helicopters later arrived and bombarded the insurgents attempting to maneuver among the rocks.[45] The Taliban fired RPGs at the helicopters.[46]

Some insurgents were killed in these airstrikes. The rest managed to take cover underneath large boulders along the mountain. They waited for the helicopters to make a pass, and then moved from the cover of one rock to another.[47]

As dusk fell, the remaining insurgents stopped firing and attempted to flee under the cover of darkness, some carrying their dead on donkeys.[48] Most moved northwest over the mountain, while some attempted to flee to the northeast up a small tributary valley.[49] AC-130 gunships arrived to target the fleeing Taliban.[50]

The paratroopers later found several large caches of heavy weapons, mortars, small arms, and explosives on the mountain.[51]

**Conclusion**

The insurgents apparently believed that the small platoon sent to find them at Chalbar was the full extent of the US force. That may explain their decision to surround and attack the platoon. Once they engaged the platoon, they revealed their location, which allowed Chosen Company to airlift additional forces into blocking positions, encircle the large insurgent force, and hit it with airstrikes.[52]

Sending a small reconnaissance force in first to gain contact with the insurgents and identify their locations was a tactic that Chosen Company often used to find insurgents in Afghanistan's remote mountains. The paratroopers had learned that the Taliban tended to avoid US troops in large numbers. They would, however, occasionally attack a small and isolated US force, thus revealing their location.[53]

The insurgents may also have chosen to stand and fight in order to defend what appeared to have been a base area on the mountain above Chalbar village. It is likely that the force attacked the district center and then returned to its base once Chosen Company arrived to re-establish the district government. The insurgents then attempted to fight off the platoon sent to pursue them.

The insurgents managed to continue fighting through repeated airstrikes – in part by hiding behind large boulders. They tried unsuccessfully to shoot down the helicopters with RPGs.

## Vignette 16: Defense of Base Area, Gumbad Valley, Kandahar, 2005-2006

**Key points**

In 2005 and 2006, US and Canadian forces attempted to clear and hold the strategic Gumbad valley, about 80 kilometers north of Kandahar city. The valley was a known Taliban base area where large numbers of insurgents repeatedly gathered. Its inaccessibility made it an ideal safe haven for insurgents operating further south.

When attacked, insurgents withdrew into the mountains, waited for the Coalition to withdraw, and then returned. In 2005, US and Afghan forces carried out three battalion-level operations to clear the valley. Each time, the insurgents launched carefully laid ambushes and fled. Few insurgents were killed or wounded in these engagements.

During the first two offensives, insurgents fought from fortified, well-concealed positions on a mountain overlooking Gumbad village. In the third offensive, insurgents ambushed advancing troops in outlying areas to the south, and employed a sniper whose position was never identified. In all three instances, the insurgents fled using pre-planned escape routes minutes before air support arrived.

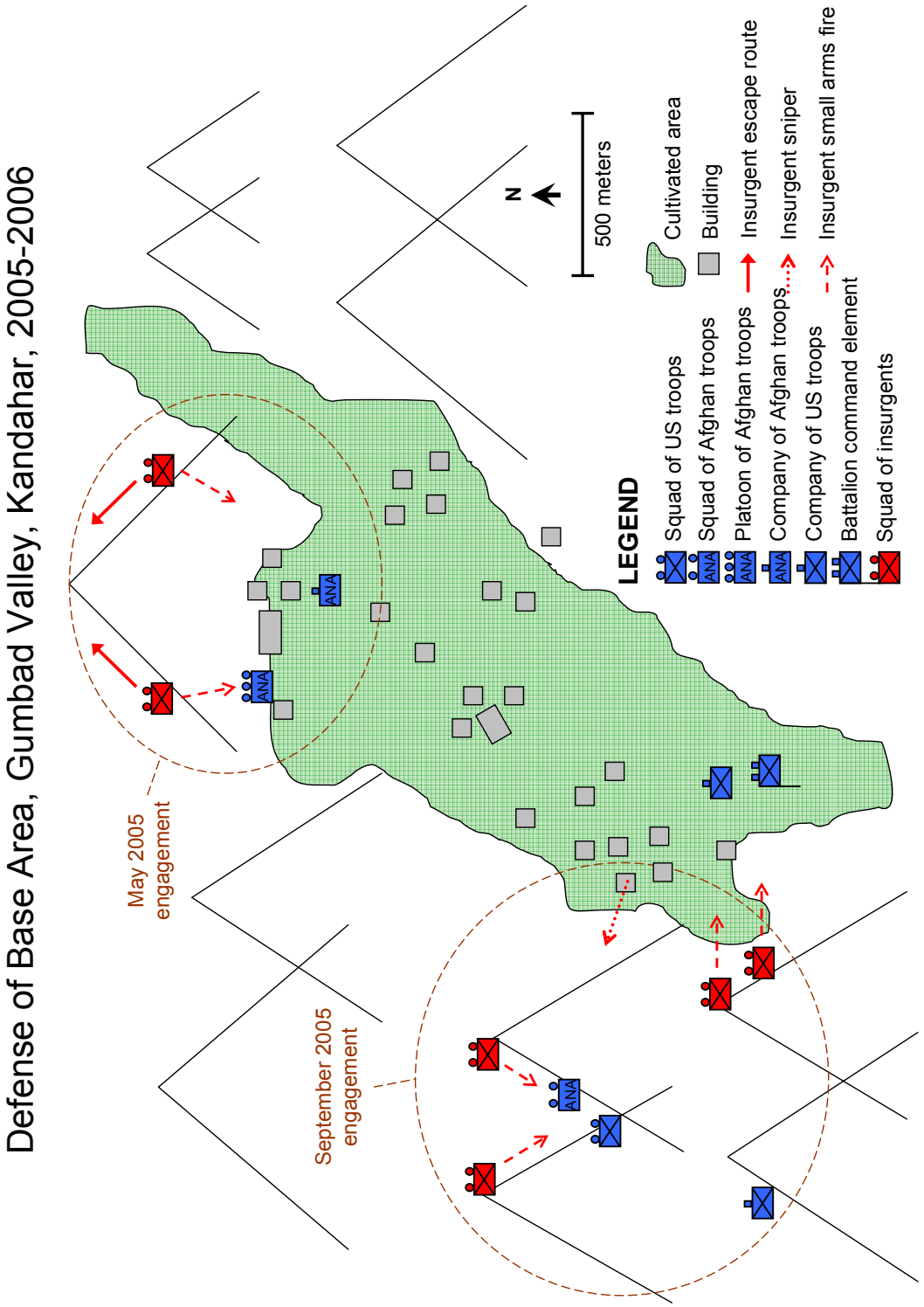
After the US battalion established a patrol base in the valley in October 2005, the insurgents shifted to laying IEDs along the only route into Gumbad. They also carried out numerous small ambushes on the road, frequently harassed the base, and once attacked soldiers in the midst of a shura in the village. Canadian forces, which took over the position in early 2006, abandoned the base that summer.

The Gumbad engagements demonstrate that battalion-level clearing operations often have little effect unless forces are left behind to hold the area. They also suggest that remote patrol bases can be protected; it is the routes to and from these bases that are most vulnerable.

**Defense of Gumbad valley – May, July, September 2005**

In early May 2005, the 3rd Battalion, 319th Airborne Field Artillery Regiment (3-319 AFAR), also known as Task Force Gun Devils, launched a battalion-level operation to clear the Gumbad valley in the mountains north of Kandahar. The isolated valley was an insurgent base area.

On the afternoon of 4 May, the battalion entered the Gumbad valley and approached the village on the valley's northern edge. Paratroopers set up artillery positions south of the village, while a company of Afghan army troops and their US trainers moved into the town.[54] As they entered the village, they noticed that the place was deserted; everyone had left earlier that day or the day before.[55]


Defense of Base Area, Gumbad Valley, Kandahar, 2005-2006
May 2005 engagement
September 2005 engagement
ANA
N
500 meters
LEGEND
Squad of US troops
Squad of Afghan troops
Platoon of Afghan troops
Company of Afghan troops
Company of US troops
Battalion command element
Squad of insurgents
Cultivated area
Building
Insurgent escape route
Insurgent sniper
Insurgent small arms fire

A group of insurgents hiding behind a pile of rocks above the village to the northeast fired on the company with machine guns and RPGs, pinning some soldiers down behind a mud wall. Another group of about 20-30 insurgents hiding in a second concealed position northwest of the town held their fire, so as not to give away their presence. Their intention was to wait as their comrades to the east pushed the troops into a pre-planned kill zone.[56]

A platoon of Afghan troops moved around the village to the west and climbed up onto the high ground, intending to flank the insurgents who had fired on the company. When the soldiers moved into an exposed area above the village, the insurgents hiding northwest of the village opened fire, killing nine Afghan soldiers and wounding three others.[57]

The battalion bombarded the mountainside with artillery rounds and called in airstrikes, but did not launch a second ground assault. The insurgents broke contact shortly before the aircraft arrived. They escaped by climbing up a set of irrigation ducts running down the mountain. They then flooded the ducts to prevent the soldiers below from giving chase.[58]

The soldiers patrolled the village and nearby mountains until 14 May, when they returned to their base outside Kandahar city. The insurgents then came back down from the mountains and resumed their activities in the valley.[59]

In early June, the battalion launched a second, similar operation to clear Gumbad after reports indicated that large numbers of insurgents were operating there. As a company of US and Afghan soldiers moved through the village, a group of insurgents opened fire from the same mountainside they had used in early May, wounding three ANA troops and one US soldier.[60]

The battalion immediately pounded the mountainside with artillery. The insurgents kept firing through the artillery barrage, but broke contact once air support arrived. The soldiers fired artillery shells on the mountainside all night and patrolled the area for the next two weeks. All they found were a few blood trails. Despite the heavy artillery fire, the insurgents managed to evacuate their wounded.[61]

After the June operation, US soldiers returned to Gumbad about once every other week.[62] The insurgents again resumed their activities in the valley.

In late September and early October, 3-319 AFAR launched a third battalion-level operation in Gumbad. This time, the aim was to set up a permanent patrol base to house a US platoon on the outskirts of the village.

The insurgents did not position themselves on the mountainside north of the village, as they had done in the first two operations. Instead, they set up ambushes from two strong points on the southern edge of the valley on the approach to the village, in order to target dismounted soldiers moving on the high ground. They may have observed troops moving along the ridgelines the day before, or predicted that the battalion would send dismounted

troops along the high ground ahead of the rest of the force. A sniper waited in a concealed position in the valley below.[63]

On 30 September, soldiers of B Company, 1st Battalion, 508th Infantry Regiment (B/1-508), along with a squad of Afghan troops, moved north on foot along the ridgelines overlooking the valley to the east and west. Their mission was to sweep the high ground of enemy positions, in order to prevent the Taliban from firing on the bulk of US forces moving through the valley below.

At about 4:30 pm, a squad of Afghan troops, who were moving ahead of B Company, ran into a group of five insurgents setting up a machine gun position on a hilltop on the southern edge of the valley. The insurgents pinned the squad down with heavy fire.[64]

Insurgents in three other locations then opened fire on the rest of the battalion as it entered the valley below. Insurgents also detonated an IED on a convoy moving through a back road into the valley.

As B Company ran along the ridgeline to rescue the beleaguered Afghan squad, an insurgent sniper opened fire from a concealed position in the valley below, killing a US soldier.[65]

As the company reached the squad's position, the sniper shot and killed one of the Afghan soldiers and wounded another. He then shot a US troop in the back as he climbed the hill towards the insurgents' machine gun position. The soldiers could not identify where exactly the sniper fire was coming from.[66]

As darkness fell, the insurgents broke contact and the fighting died down. The next day, the battalion moved into the valley without facing further resistance, and began setting up a patrol base on the outskirts of Gumbad village.[67]

**Insurgents threaten road leading to Gumbad patrol base**

Once US forces set up a permanent base in Gumbad, the insurgents shifted to small hit-and-run ambushes and IEDs along the only road into the valley. The road was a rutted goat trail barely wide enough for military vehicles.

The insurgents often carried out IED attacks, followed by a small ambush. On five occasions between October 2005 and January 2006, insurgents around Gumbad detonated an IED, then fired a volley of RPGs followed by small arms, and quickly broke contact.[68]

Canadian forces from A Company, 1st Battalion, Princess Patricia's Canadian Light Infantry took over Gumbad patrol base in February 2006. That spring and summer, the insurgents stepped up IED attacks on the road into the valley.

In March and April, there were four IED explosions within a ten-kilometer radius of the patrol base – each more powerful than the last.[69] A massive IED explosion on 22 April

killed four Canadian soldiers just northeast of the base, on a road inside the valley. In May, two IED attacks at a nearby location wounded seven Canadian soldiers.[70]

Insurgents also harassed the patrol base. In late February, a week after Canadian troops occupied the position, insurgents fired RPGs on the base from the same mountainside they had used as a defensive position during US operations in May and June of the previous year.[71]

The villagers remained hostile. There were few men of fighting age to be seen.[72]

Canadian forces abandoned the patrol base in late summer 2006, during the run-up to a major operation southwest of Kandahar city. The Gumbad valley then reverted back to Taliban control.[73]

**Conclusion**

In all three operations, the insurgents planned to harass the battalion-sized force as it entered the valley, and disengage before the battalion could make full use of its firepower. In this respect, their effort was carefully planned. Their firing positions were well placed, as were their escape routes. They appear to have taken few casualties.

In the first assault in May, insurgents used fire discipline to lure Afghan troops into a kill zone. Insurgents in one firing position lured the troops into an exposed area, while insurgents in a second position held their fire until the right moment. They also continued to fire through continual artillery bombardment, breaking contact only when air support arrived or darkness fell.

During the third operation in September, the insurgents employed a sharpshooter on the low ground against dismounted soldiers moving along the ridgeline. Snipers were extremely rare in Afghanistan.

Once the US forces set up a patrol base in the valley, the insurgents shifted to harassing the only route into the valley – through small ambushes and IED attacks. They recognized that the Coalition's most vulnerable point was its long lines of communication, not the base itself. Canadian forces eventually abandoned the position, in part because the cost of reinforcing and resupplying it was too great.

The fighting in Gumbad was typical of many large operations in remote valleys during the war against the Soviets in the 1980s: insurgents would fight the attacking force from concealed positions with an easy escape route planned, break contact before air support arrived, wait in the nearby hills for the force to leave, and then return. Local people familiar with these tactics knew that the insurgents would soon come back, and so kept their distance.

It is unlikely that the first two battalion-level operations had much effect on the insurgents. It was not until the third operation in the fall when the battalion set up a

permanent position in the valley, that US forces substantially disrupted the insurgents' operations.

Finally, the Gumbad engagements demonstrate the advantages and disadvantages of dismounted operations. On the one hand, it was impossible for US or Afghan troops to close on the insurgents' positions without moving on foot. On the other hand, these troops were vulnerable, and took relatively heavy casualties.

## Vignette 17: Defense of Base Area, Panjwayi, Kandahar, Sept-Dec 2006

### Key points

During the summer of 2006, hundreds of Taliban fighters massed in the strategic and heavily cultivated Panjwayi valley, which extends to the western outskirts of Kandahar city. From there, the Taliban planned to launch a major offensive on the provincial capital.

In September 2006, a Canadian-led multinational force of some 1,400 troops from different countries surrounded the valley and advanced from multiple directions. The Taliban attempted to repel the assault and hold the valley using conventional military tactics.

They fought from fortified buildings, trenches, and dug-in positions on mountaintops, and used the cover of marijuana fields, vineyards, irrigation canals, and tunnels. The insurgents launched carefully laid ambushes and counterattacks. Finally overwhelmed by Coalition artillery and airstrikes, the Taliban conducted a disciplined retreat.

The Taliban later infiltrated back into the valley, and switched to guerilla tactics involving IEDs, suicide bombings, and small hit-and-run ambushes. When the Coalition launched a second clearing operation in December, the insurgents melted away with minimal resistance. Insurgents continue to operate in the Panjwayi today.

### Preparations for Operation Medusa

On 2 September 2006, the 1st Battalion, Royal Canadian Regiment supported by Dutch, US, and Afghan forces (1,400 soldiers in all) launched an operation to clear the Panjwayi valley, where as many as 1,000 Taliban were believed to be massing in preparation for an assault on Kandahar city.

During the summer of 2006, large groups of insurgents had launched repeated ambushes on Coalition forces attempting to enter Panjwayi. The valley as a whole was known to be anti-government – in part because of traditional Taliban links, and in part because of a series of corruption scandals and systematic abuses by local police.[74]

The Coalition's plan was to surround the valley, take up positions on its high points, then bombard the insurgents' positions with artillery and airstrikes and move slowly in. Afghan army soldiers and their US trainers attacked from the north, while US Special Forces pushed in from the south. Dutch, Danish, and American forces patrolled the outer perimeter to catch fleeing insurgents. The Canadian battle group moved into the heart of Panjwayi towards a cluster of villages known as Pashmul.[75]

The provincial governor announced the operation over the radio on 30 August, while Coalition aircraft dropped leaflets warning civilians of the impending battle. The Taliban also warned the local people that there would be fighting. Thousands of civilians –

mostly old men, women, and children – fled the valley as Coalition forces moved in. Most men of fighting age stayed behind.[76]

The insurgents prepared to defend the valley like a conventional army. They stockpiled weapons, mined roads and footpaths, laid ambushes, and set up concealed defensive positions. Many took cover in the valley's numerous small grape houses, which had sundried mud walls that were two to three feet thick and as hard as concrete. These buildings had slits in the walls, which made them natural bunkers. Tall marijuana plants, grape orchards, and trees provided cover. Insurgents moved unobserved using the valley's many irrigation canals, as well as a network of tunnels. They set up machinegun and over-watch positions on hills and mountaintops.[77]

**Ambush on Charles Company**

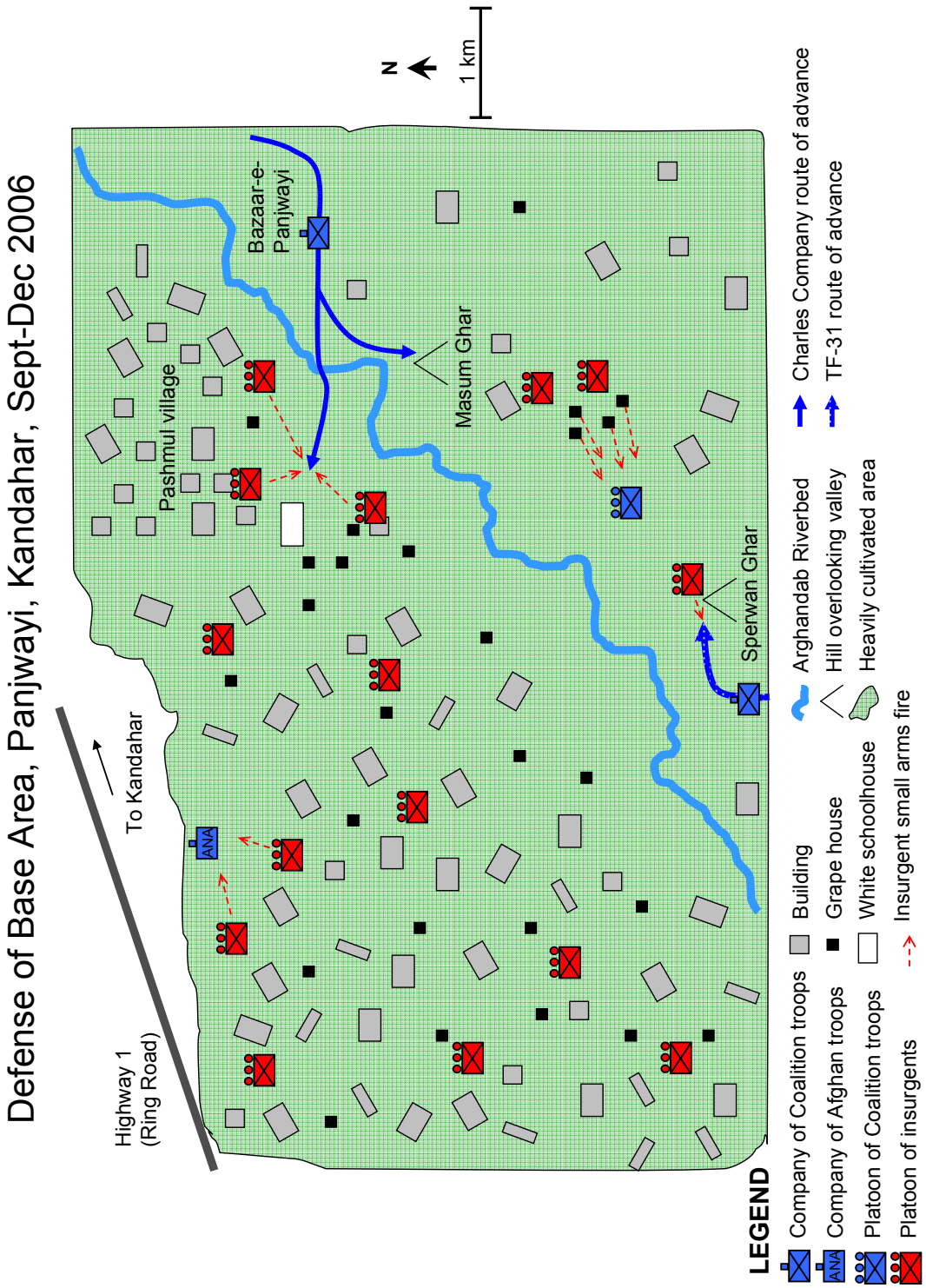
The soldiers of Charles Company, 1st Battalion, Royal Canadian Regiment, spear-headed the assault. On 2 September, the first day of the operation, they seized two high points overlooking the valley. On 3 September, the company moved through Bazaar-e-Panjwayi and over the Arghandab River bed on their way to the village of Pashmul. They moved slowly and with difficulty across the uneven terrain in eight-wheeled LAVs.

A few hundred meters away at a place known as the white schoolhouse, over 100 insurgents waited in a carefully laid ambush. The Taliban predicted that the soldiers would pass by the schoolhouse on their way to Pashmul. The Taliban had killed four Canadian soldiers a month earlier in an ambush at the same location.[78]

The insurgents had large stocks of ammunition and were well-concealed: some were in trenches and small fortified buildings, others behind trees. They waited as the convoy crept over the riverbed and moved into a tall field of marijuana plants. When the convoy stopped about 30 meters from the schoolhouse, the insurgents launched a barrage of RPGs from three different directions, followed by a steady hail of small arms fire.

The soldiers had very little visibility, and could not see where the shooting was coming from. The fire, though not very accurate, was devastating because of its shear magnitude and the fact that it was coming from so many different angles. The initial burst of fire disabled three of the convoy's six vehicles, killed one soldier, and wounded at least two others.

Charles Company withdrew some distance away to treat its wounded. The insurgents then closed on the casualty collection point, hitting it with RPGs and recoilless rifles, killing one soldier and wounding several others. The soldiers laid down a heavy barrage of suppressive fire and withdrew back across the riverbed, after more than four hours of heavy fighting.[79]


Defense of Base Area, Panjwayi, Kandahar, Sept-Dec 2006
Highway 1
(Ring Road)
To Kandahar
ANA
Pashmul village
Bazaar-e-
Panjwayi
Masum Ghar
Sperwan Ghar
N
1 km
LEGEND
Company of Coalition troops
Company of Afghan troops
Platoon of Coalition troops
Platoon of insurgents
Building
Grape house
White schoolhouse
Insurgent small arms fire
Arghandab Riverbed
Hill overlooking valley
Heavily cultivated area
Charles Company route of advance
TF-31 route of advance

For the next ten days, the battle group bombarded insurgent positions across the valley with artillery and airstrikes, while soldiers moved slowly in from three sides. The bombardment killed about 100-200 insurgents, effectively breaking the resistance and forcing the Taliban to retreat. Some fled to Pakistan, others to nearby districts of Kandahar and Helmand. Many hid their weapons and remained in the valley.

**Assaults on US Special Forces**

While Canadian forces moved into the center of Panjwayi, C Company, 1st Battalion, 3rd Special Forces Group – also known as Task Force 31 – moved up from the south, along with a number of Afghan army commandoes. Their objective was to take up position on a 3,000-foot hill known as Sperwan Ghar south of the Arghandab River. From this location, which overlooked the entire valley, the task force was to call in airstrikes.[80]

On 3 September, the same day as the ambush on Charles Company, the task force moved up Sperwan Ghar. A group of insurgents on the top watched the soldiers approaching. When the task force got to within a few hundred meters of the hilltop, the insurgents opened fire from three sides with RPGs and small arms. The commandoes fought for 20 minutes, until they nearly ran out of ammunition. They then broke contact and moved back towards the southern edge of the valley to await resupply by helicopter.

On 4 September, the task force assaulted Sperwan Ghar a second time, with the help of close air support. As the convoy moved up the road, the insurgents fired on it constantly. They also detonated a command-wired IED that destroyed one vehicle and wounded several soldiers. An Afghan soldier walking nearby stepped on an anti-personnel mine.[81]

As the task force neared the summit, the insurgents retreated, and the commandoes took control of the hilltop in the late afternoon. That night, the insurgents counter-attacked. They again retreated after four were killed. The next day, the insurgents attacked again; they fought the commandoes for four to five hours before breaking contact. The insurgents then abandoned their efforts to re-take the hill. For the next ten days, the task force called in air and artillery strikes across the valley, killing as many as 200 insurgents.

On 11 September, part of the task force moved off Sperwan Ghar to block insurgents fleeing operations by 10th Mountain Division troops south of the river. The terrain was too difficult for vehicles, so the soldiers moved on foot. About two kilometers from the base of the hill, insurgents ambushed the patrol from a complex of grape-houses. The soldiers managed to break contact only after calling in airstrikes on the buildings. They then returned to their main position on the hilltop.[82]

By 19 September, the fighting was over, and most of the troops returned to their bases. The Canadian battle group remained in the valley in order to hold the area and begin reconstruction.

**Switch to guerrilla tactics**

Following the cessation of major combat operations, Canadian soldiers set up a few semi-permanent outposts and began construction of a three-kilometer road running through Panjwayi – from Highway 1 on the valley's northern edge to Masum Ghar, a hill on the southern side of the Arghandab River. Masum Ghar was the location of a proposed forward operating base.[83]

Insurgents infiltrated back into Panjwayi and blended in with the population. By November, there were more than 800 fighters in the valley.[84] They constantly harassed Canadian soldiers guarding the construction crews. Most attacks consisted of IEDs, suicide attacks, and small hit-and-run ambushes. Between late September and mid October, ten Canadian soldiers were killed in these engagements.[85]

During the night, insurgents planted mines and IEDs and set up small ambushes, many of them within a few hundred meters of the battle group's fortified positions. The insurgents also moved weapons around in numerous small caches in preparation for fighting during the day. The Canadians made few efforts to find these caches, nor did they set up checkpoints to interdict insurgent movement. They had barely enough forces to protect their construction crews.[86]

The insurgents moved easily through the marijuana fields and irrigation canals. When walking in the open during the day, they did not carry weapons, knowing that they would not be fired on if unarmed. They continued to use the thick-walled grape-houses as bunkers from which to fire at Canadian troops.

One of the largest insurgent attacks during the reconstruction phase of Operation Medusa was a simultaneous assault on five different Canadian positions along the road. One was on Strong Point Center, a heavily fortified position on top of a small outcropping overlooking the road. Grape vineyards extended up to the base's eastern perimeter. To the north were marijuana fields and grape-houses.[87]

The insurgents massed west of the base, using the cover of trees and marijuana fields. The attack came in the late afternoon, which meant that the sun would be in the eyes of soldiers attempting to return fire. The insurgents launched a barrage of RPGs followed by small arms fire, killing two soldiers and wounding three others. They concentrated on three locations: a group of soldiers in an exposed position manning the southwest perimeter, an empty trench near the western wall, and an observation post on the southeast corner.

At the same time, 20-30 insurgents armed with RPK machine guns and RPGs ambushed a platoon of Canadian soldiers providing security for the road construction crew. The insurgents fired from a cluster of grape-drying huts near where six suspicious-looking unarmed men had been seen walking only hours before. The insurgents also attacked a convoy carrying the company commander and his tactical command headquarters.

In all five locations, the insurgents pounded the Canadian positions with RPGs, pinned soldiers down with small arms, and then broke contact before artillery or airstrikes came in. The most damaging fire came during the first 30 seconds of fighting.[88]

**Second Coalition offensive, insurgents melt away**

In December 2006, Canadian, US, and Dutch forces launched a second major offensive in the Panjwayi. Their aim was to push the Taliban out a second time, then set up checkpoints across the valley manned by Afghan army troops.

The plan was similar to Operation Medusa: surround the valley, warn the population through leaflets and radio broadcasts, bombard suspected insurgent positions with artillery and airstrikes, and then slowly clear each village.

In December, many of the vineyards and marijuana fields that had provided cover for the insurgents during Operation Medusa in September were fallow and brown. It was also cold. Most important, the insurgents knew from their experience in September that defending the valley was pointless.

The insurgents melted away before the Coalition advance. They abandoned their arms caches and left behind booby traps to slow the soldiers' advance.

The Coalition set up checkpoints every three to four miles along the south side of the Arghandab River. Most were manned by Afghan army troops, with some police. US Special Forces then left the valley, leaving it for Afghan and NATO troops to occupy permanently.

**Conclusion**

The fighting in the Panjwayi represents one of the few times that Afghan insurgents have mounted a conventional defense on a large scale. They fought from concealed, dug-in positions and attacked approaching convoys. They also told non-combatants to leave the valley before the battle, rather than use them as cover.

Panjwayi was reportedly in open rebellion prior to Operation Medusa. It is likely that most, if not all, the males of fighting age were involved in the battle. Many remained in the valley after the operation was over.

The insurgents apparently believed that they could hold the valley against a major Coalition offensive. They had massed in large numbers and were well stocked with heavy weapons and ammunition. The terrain favored the insurgents, with its fields of tall marijuana plants, vineyards, bunker-like grape-houses, irrigation canals, and undeveloped roads.

The insurgents withdrew only after several days of heavy air and artillery bombardment. They did so in a disciplined fashion, taking many of their dead and wounded with them. When the Coalition returned a second time with a similar battle plan, the insurgents put

up no resistance. By then it was obvious that any attempt to hold the valley would fail. It was also cold and the fields were fallow.

The fighting in the Panjwayi demonstrates what can happen when a major insurgent stronghold is cleared, but too few forces are left behind to hold it during reconstruction. Canadian forces attempted to build a road through the valley, but did not have enough soldiers to set up checkpoints and patrol the area. The insurgents quickly infiltrated back in, re-established control over the population, and launched a devastating campaign of small ambushes, suicide bombings, and IED attacks.

## Vignette 18: Defense against Raid, Now Zad, Helmand, September 2008

### Key points

In September 2008, a platoon of US Marines launched a raid on a suspected IED factory in a village north of Now Zad in Helmand province. A company-sized force of insurgents stood and fought to defend the town.

The insurgents were armed with large stocks of heavy weapons, including rockets, and attempted to maneuver on the attacking force. After destroying the IED factory, the Marines were ambushed numerous times on their way back to base.

### Defense against raid north of Now Zad

In 2008, Now Zad district had one of the highest concentrations of Taliban fighters in southern Afghanistan. Marines controlled the Now Zad district center but not its surrounds.[1]

There were numerous Taliban bases in Now Zad's rural areas. In order to defend these bases, the Taliban built an extensive system of interlocking, mutually supporting firing positions in trenches and buildings outside the district center. It was nearly impossible to assault these positions without coming under fire from two or three directions. The roads were littered with IEDs.

In September 2008, the Marines learned of a large IED factory in Bar Now Zad, a small town 25-30 kilometers north of the Now Zad district center. This area was entirely controlled by the Taliban; no US force had ever travelled to Bar Now Zad.

A force reconnaissance platoon attached to 2nd Battalion, 7th Marines was sent to destroy the IED factory and gather information about the area. At about 3:00 am, under the cover of darkness, the platoon moved west and then north, skirting the edge of the Taliban's defensive lines. Local villagers fled as the Marines moved through the area, but there were no ambushes.

Around dawn, the platoon approached the outskirts of Bar Now Zad along a wadi. By this time, the Taliban had learned that the Marines were coming. The insurgents moved the women and children out of the town to a safe area to the west.

The insurgents then set up a large, L-shaped ambush on the eastern end of the village. They pre-registered large quantities of mortars and rockets to land in a narrow part of the wadi along the platoon's route of advance. About 30 insurgents were directly involved in the initial ambush, supported by as many as 70 more. A single high-level commander coordinated their activities.

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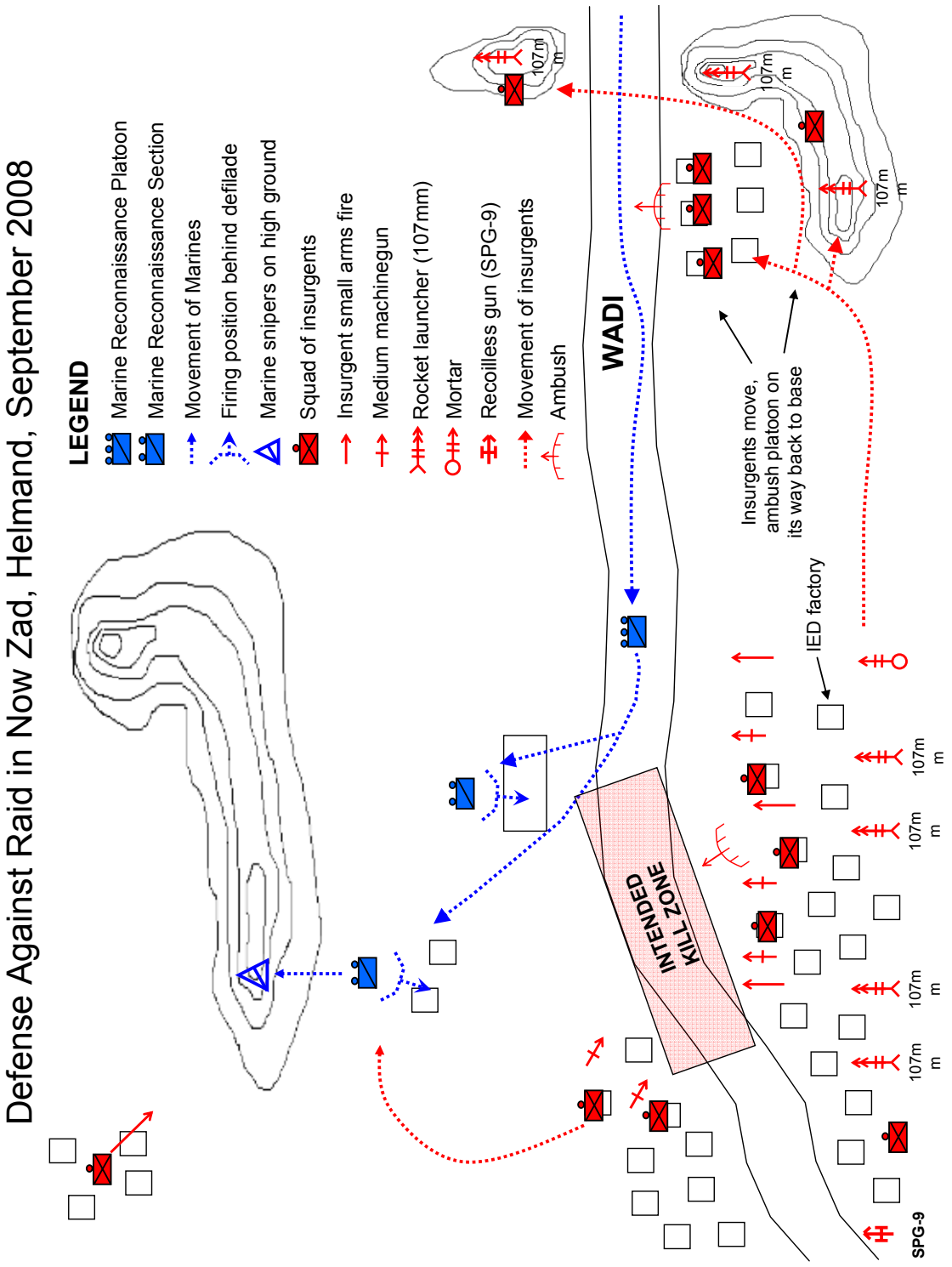
[1] All information in this vignette came from briefings by and interviews with the commanding officer of Force Reconnaissance Platoon, Task Force 2/7. Interviews dated 31 July, 3 August, 4 August 2008.


Defense Against Raid in Now Zad, Helmand, September 2008
LEGEND
Marine Reconnaissance Platoon
Marine Reconnaissance Section
Movement of Marines
Firing position behind defilade
Marine snipers on high ground
Squad of insurgents
Insurgent small arms fire
Medium machinegun
Rocket launcher (107mm)
Mortar
Recoilless gun (SPG-9)
Movement of insurgents
Ambush
WADI
INTENDED KILL ZONE
Insurgents move, ambush platoon on its way back to base
IED factory
SPG-9
107m

The insurgents' plan was to hold their fire until the Marines entered the narrow confines of the town, then open fire on the convoy's left flank and rear.

The Marines saw the ambush coming and turned north out of the wadi. As they did so, the insurgents fired 107mm rockets, 120mm mortars, and machineguns. Because the insurgents were forced to re-aim their weapons, the initial volley of fire was not very accurate. The insurgents quickly readjusted and began bracketing the Marines' positions.

The Marines split into two sections. One squad took cover behind a graveyard, the other behind a pair of buildings. A few Marines occupied a piece of high ground to the north. They got out of their vehicles and fired south into the town.

With the platoon pinned down under heavy fire, a group of about ten insurgents attempted to maneuver north around the Marines' western flank. A turret gunner manning a 50 caliber machinegun spotted the insurgents and killed most of them.

An insurgent sharp-shooter using a bolt-action rifle fired on the Marine snipers. The insurgent sniper was located some 500 meters away in a cluster of buildings to the northwest. His fire was quite accurate, but did not hit any of the Marines.

At the same time, insurgents began moving explosives out of a cluster of buildings inside the town that had served as an IED factory. A group of Cobra attack helicopters arrived and fired at Taliban positions, yet the insurgents kept fighting.

Some of the helicopter fire ignited the explosives inside the factory, causing an enormous explosion that destroyed much of the insurgents' munitions. Once the IED factory was destroyed, many of the insurgents stopped trying to hold ground and dispersed. Their mission completed, the Marines moved out.

**Ambushes on platoon as it returned to base**

Insurgents ambushed the Marines repeatedly on their way back to base. For example, as the Marines moved away from the town to the east, the insurgents maneuvered and ambushed the platoon at a chokepoint with high ground on both sides.

Most of these were small, ineffectual ambushes involving a handful of enemy fighters. They served to delay the Marines while insurgents organized a larger ambush 20 kilometers south of Bar Now Zad, in the village of Daud Zai.

As the platoon approached Daud Zai from the north down a wadi, a squad of insurgents opened fire with machineguns and RPGs from buildings inside the village. The Marines set up a support-by-fire position north of the village, and sent a team on foot to the west, in order to outflank the insurgents. The insurgents were focused on the vehicles and did not notice the Marines moving on foot.

The dismounted team moved into the village and cleared the enemy from their ambush positions. Meanwhile, the rest of the platoon pushed south. As it did so, one of the

vehicles hit a pressure-plate IED, followed by a second ambush. The Marines moving on foot through the village rushed south and eliminated this second ambush party.

The Marines cleared the village, evacuated their wounded, and moved on. They encountered sporadic fighting for the next five kilometers before returning to base.

**Conclusion**

The insurgents in Now Zad operated a sophisticated system of defensive positions intended to stop or delay Coalition forces that were trying to reach Taliban base areas north of the district center. The positions were mutually reinforcing and difficult to maneuver around.

The insurgents in Bar Now Zad did not melt away as the Marines approached. Instead, they stood their ground and attempted to defend their stockpile of IEDs and other heavy munitions. Whereas most ambushes in Afghanistan begin with a volley of RPGs, this one began with a barrage of mortars and rockets.

After pinning the Marines down with heavy weapons fire, a team of insurgents moved immediately to flank the platoon to the north. Marine snipers on the high ground were decisive in preventing this flanking attack.

The insurgents fell back after their IED factory was destroyed by airstrikes, yet they continued to fight. Fighters along the Marines' route back continually ambushed the platoon as it made its way back to base.

## Vignette 19: Defense of Shewan, Farah, August 2008

### Key points

Shewan, a large village in Bala Baluk district in Afghanistan's southwestern province of Farah, was the location of several large-scale attacks on Coalition forces in 2007 and 2008. Its fighters were known to be well organized and proficient at guerrilla warfare.

In early August 2008, the US Marines initiated a clearing operation of the town. A number of high-level insurgent commanders and their personal security detachments were present in Shewan when the Marines arrived. There were also many enemy fighters in the town and surrounding area. Their confidence was high after a successful ambush against a Marine convoy in Shewan just two weeks earlier.

A group of 250 or more insurgents – many of them highly trained – attempted to defend the town.[2] The enemy fought from prepared positions in a long trench and along a tree line. They pinned down two squads of Marines, one of them saved only by close air support. The battle lasted for over eight hours.

### Large-scale ambush, Marines pinned down

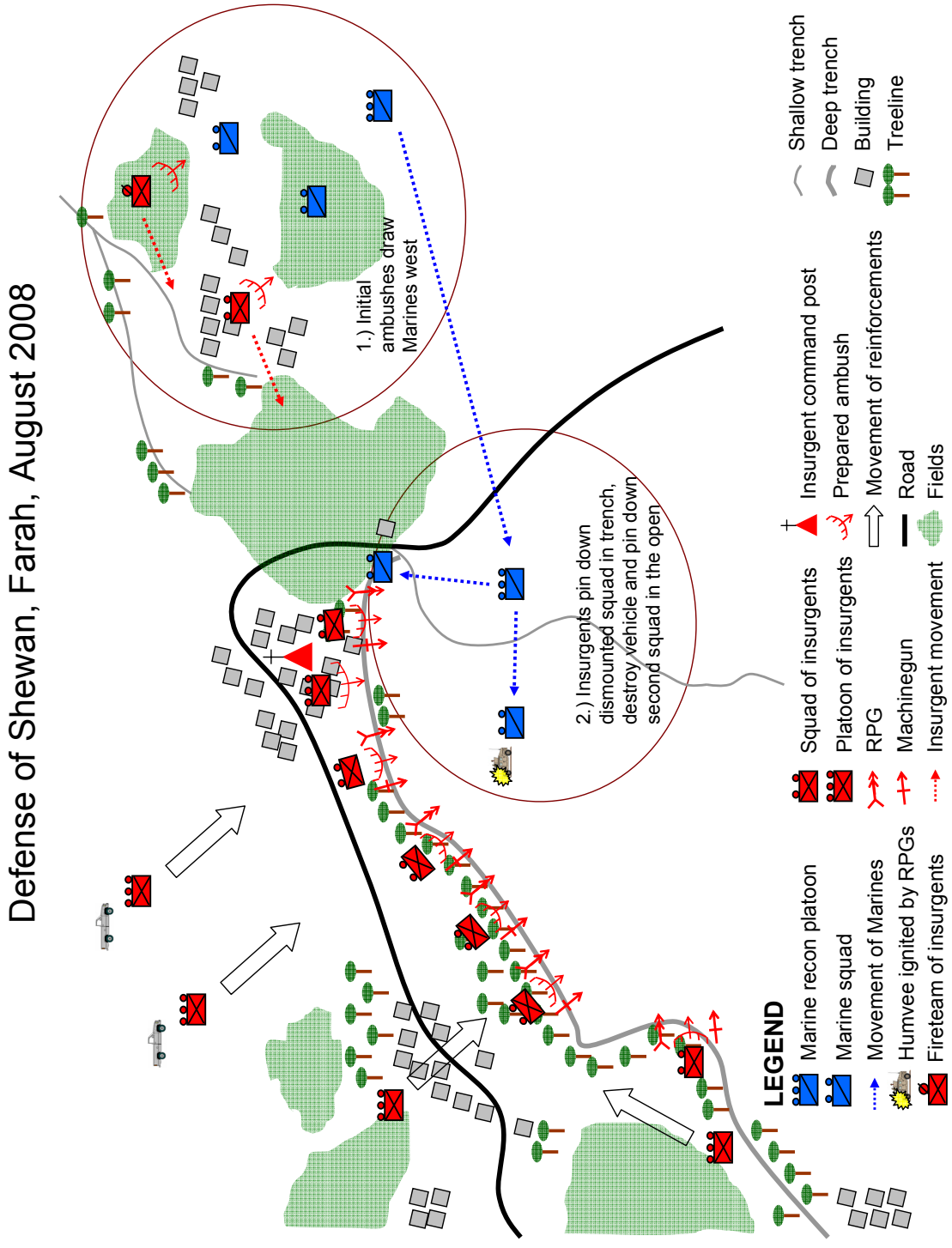
On the morning of 8 August 2008, a reinforced platoon of Marines from 1st Reconnaissance Battalion and Golf Company, 2nd Battalion, 7th Marines went to Shewan to clear the town of insurgents. The operation was in response to a catastrophic ambush of a Marine convoy in the town on 23 July [see Vignette 5].

At about 8:00 or 9:00 am, the Marines arrived at Shewan without incident and began patrolling the town. The platoon was spread out in staggered formation, with half in trucks and the rest on foot following behind. They patrolled east to west; one section moved through the buildings of the town, another further north along the tree line. Two sections remained in reserve by the highway to the south.

There were women and children about, but most shops were closed. Insurgents in the area tended to retreat in the face of such a large force. The platoon did not expect to see much fighting.

What the Marines did not know was that more than 100 enemy fighters and a number of high-level Taliban commanders were in the town that morning. More insurgents were in the surrounding area. The insurgents had numerous prepared firing positions in a deep trench covered by a long tree line, and in numerous buildings inside the town.

[2] This vignette is based entirely on interviews with and briefings by the Commanding Officer of Alpha Company, 1st Reconnaissance Battalion, 1st Marine Division.


Defense of Shewan, Farah, August 2008
1.) Initial ambushes draw Marines west
2.) Insurgents pin down dismounted squad in trench, destroy vehicle and pin down second squad in the open
LEGEND
Marine recon platoon
Marine squad
Movement of Marines
Humvee ignited by RPGs
Fireteam of insurgents
Squad of insurgents
Platoon of insurgents
RPG
Machinegun
Insurgent movement
Insurgent command post
Prepared ambush
Movement of reinforcements
Road
Fields
Shallow trench
Deep trench
Building
Treeline

Their plan was to draw the Marines into an ambush on the western end of Shewan. The Taliban commanders were in a cluster of buildings in the northern part of the town, some distance away from the planned ambush.

At about 11:45 am, a small team of insurgents fired RPGs and PK machineguns at the platoon's vehicles in the northeastern section of Shewan. The Marines following the vehicles on foot maneuvered around the gunmen and killed them as they tried to flee to the west. Civilians then began fleeing the town to the west.

At 11:55 am, another group of insurgents fired at the patrol and also fled to the west. The Marines realized that this was an attempt to draw the platoon into a prepared ambush. They returned fire but did not pursue the enemy fighters. Instead, they continued to patrol slowly through the town.

At about 1:00 pm, as it moved slowly west, the platoon came under RPG and small arms fire. A team of six Marines dismounted and counterattacked to the north. The team moved only 40 meters before it came under heavy fire from about 30 insurgents in at least two machinegun positions further north. The Marines bounded into a nearby irrigation ditch where they remained pinned down.

Three of the platoon's vehicles then moved west in order to suppress some of the enemy fire on the Marines in the trench. Insurgents in a tree line to the north fired a volley of RPGs, hitting the front of one of the Humvees and causing it to burst into flames.

As they got out of the burning vehicle, the Marines came under heavy machinegun fire. The truck's gunner remained in the turret for almost a minute; by doing so, he managed to suppress some of this fire until all the Marines were out of the truck. He then managed to get out of the truck safely.

Enemy fighters opened fire from additional positions along the western part of the trench, which was as deep as seven feet in some places. More armed men ran from the town to the tree line along the trench. By this time, there were over 100 insurgents firing on the patrol from 12-16 separate positions.

The Marines from the destroyed Humvee were in the open, pinned down behind a small mound of dirt that offered little cover. Those in the second truck were also under heavy fire. In the meantime, the other squad remained pinned down on the eastern end of the trench several hundred meters away.

Another Humvee drove into the open in order to rescue the Marines pinned down in the open near their destroyed vehicle. Insurgents fired a volley of RPGs at the front of the vehicle. One RPG damaged a front wheel and another skipped off the windshield, but they failed to disable the Humvee. Yet, the Marines in the gun-truck could not immediately reach the burning vehicle because of the heavy fire.

The next 20 minutes saw extremely heavy fighting, during which at least 60 RPGs, three 107mm rockets, and four 82mm mortar rounds landed near the squad's position.

The Marines shot and killed a number of Taliban in the trench, but this did little to deter the rest of the enemy force. The enemy fire remained steady and accurate. The Marines were outnumbered more than three to one.

Insurgents from nearby towns drove in from the north. They got out of their trucks and ran 400-500 meters across open fields to join the fight. Some fighters also came from a compound to the north where a number of high-level Taliban commanders were coordinating the battle.

Several Marine snipers moved towards these compounds and shot a number of enemy fighters coming out of the buildings. The Taliban leaders were pinned down inside the compound. The commanders issued a distress call to insurgents from the surrounding area; more fighters arrived in vehicles from nearby towns.

At about 1:20 pm – some 20 minutes after the patrol's Humvee was ignited by a volley of RPGs – air support arrived. There were few clearly discernible targets because of the amount of dust around the insurgents' positions.

Coalition aircraft strafed the western part of the trench and the tree line, which caused considerable damage to the densely packed enemy force and temporarily suppressed much of its fire.

The strafing run created a one-minute lull – long enough for the Marines from the destroyed Humvee to be rescued in an MRAP. The squad pushed back east out of the kill zone, as Coalition aircraft continued to fire on enemy positions in the trench. The Marines pinned down in the eastern part of the trench also managed to escape and join the rest of the platoon.

**Marines counterattack**

The platoon regrouped about 900 meters to the southeast; the platoon's third squad remained pinned down in the eastern part of the trench. The temperature had reached close to 130 degrees Fahrenheit; several collapsed due to heatstroke. In the meantime, truckloads of insurgents were flooding into the town, bringing their numbers to 250-300.

The platoon commander decided to exploit the effect of the airstrikes and launch an immediate counterattack. Nine vehicles moved west as a feint, while 20 Marines moved on foot around the eastern end of the town. 15 Marines remained behind to launch mortars on the western side of the trench. The plan was to draw enemy fire towards the vehicles, while the Marines on foot flanked to the east.

The insurgents focused on the vehicles and did not notice the dismounted Marines until they had reached the eastern end of the trench. At about 4:45 pm, the Marines assaulted into the trench, causing panic among the insurgents inside. The dismounted Marines

moved about 200 meters west through the trench, clearing away enemy fighters. Enemy fire on the vehicles dropped off as a result.

The Marines then realized that the trench was just a defensive line intended to keep the platoon away from a group of buildings to the north. They did not yet know that a large number of high-level Taliban commanders were in these buildings coordinating the battle.

The dismounted Marines moved out of the trench and pushed north. Insurgents in mutually supporting positions further inside the town laid down heavy, interlocking fields of fire. Meanwhile, the insurgents in the tree line continued to fire at the Marines in the vehicles south of the trench.

Three Marines provided support by fire, while the other two crawled to within 100 meters of the heavily guarded compound housing the insurgent commanders. The two Marines then called in airstrikes on the compound.

Their commanders dead, many of the enemy fighters broke contact and withdrew. Most retreated further west. Their intention was to draw the Marines deeper into the town where the platoon would be more vulnerable. The Marines killed many insurgents as they withdrew but decided not to give chase.

Instead, they occupied the ground along the trench where there had been many insurgent firing positions. There were many enemy dead around the trench line. The Marines waited for the insurgents to counterattack in order to retrieve their dead, but nothing happened.

There were some 50 insurgents killed, including 12 high-level leaders. After 30 minutes, the platoon decided to return to base.

Later that month, an insurgent leader from Shewan came to the district police station and offered to negotiate with the Marines. The leader offered safe passage for Coalition forces through the town. For the next five months, Shewan and its surrounds remained relatively quiet. In November, the Marines left the district and handed it over to a police mentor team.

**Conclusion**

It is likely that during previous engagements, the insurgents had observed that Marines are more aggressive than other Coalition forces and will quickly move to flank or assault. Small teams of enemy fighters engaged the Marines from the west, intending to draw the platoon into the open and within range of prepared firing positions along the trench.

The enemy focused on the platoon’s armored vehicles moving ahead of the patrol, not on dismounted Marines. That narrow focus sometimes allowed Marines on foot to maneuver around the enemy and strike from the flank or rear. The insurgents attempted to keep the

platoon at a distance. They launched accurate RPG and small arms fire from 100-500 meters, and rockets and mortars from longer ranges.

The insurgents were well versed at targeting armored vehicles. They used PK machineguns to suppress turret gunners while engaging the fronts of the vehicles with volleys of three to five RPGs. Rather than attempt to penetrate the armor, insurgents aimed to disable the vehicles and set them on fire; then, they targeted dismounting Marines with machineguns.

Enemy fighters attempted to fix the platoon with RPG and machinegun fire and, then, maneuvered on its flanks. They moved under cover through the trench and along the tree line. The insurgents frequently attacked from one location and, then, quickly changed location.

Most of the enemy fire came from prepared positions. Inside the town, insurgents fired from behind thick mud-brick walls capable of stopping heavy machinegun rounds. The long trench south of the main town – as well as the tree line that ran along the trench – provided effective cover for maneuver, as well multiple firing positions.

Many firing positions were placed to be mutually supporting, particularly in the complex of buildings beyond the trench. As Marines assaulted one position, they were hit from other positions. During several points in the battle, Marines were pinned down by heavy fire from multiple directions, broken only by airstrikes or flanking maneuvers.

The insurgents built a multi-layered defense to keep the patrol out of the town, and to protect their leadership. Firing positions in the trench and along the tree line served as a forward defensive line. As the Marines pushed beyond this forward line, they ran into interlocking fields of fire from fortified buildings.

The platoon did not expect to face such a large enemy force. Over 250 insurgents massed in Shewan and fought in a coordinated fashion. This demonstrated a strong command-and-control structure, good communications and logistics, and careful planning.

The insurgents also demonstrated extraordinary fire discipline coordinated by experienced section leaders. In some instances, they continued firing accurately and methodically despite sniper rounds landing within inches all around them. Their fire was disciplined and accurate. RPGs landed in clusters, within a beaten zone of six to twelve inches. When pinned down by heavy fire, the insurgents did not surrender. Instead, many fought to the death; the rest broke contact only when it was clear that their leaders had been killed.

# CONCLUSION

Insurgents in Afghanistan can be hard-hitting and relentless. Countering their tactics requires an offensive mindset, even when defending convoys or static positions. Coalition forces must seize and hold the initiative and constantly exploit forward momentum, without leaving themselves too exposed. That is one of the central lessons of past insurgencies in Afghanistan, particularly at the tactical level.

The Pashtun tribesmen who fill the ranks of the Taliban were raised in a culture of perpetual guerrilla warfare. Most learned to fight at an early age, and are natural infantrymen – physically fit, comfortable with a rifle, and used to extreme hardship and risk. They are naturals at fire and maneuver, and at moving quickly across difficult terrain. They are also well versed in evasion and escape, and know how to avoid artillery and airstrikes. Against such an adversary, technology and heavy firepower are no substitute for aggressive infantry tactics – rapid maneuver, blocking positions, immediate closure, and pursuit.

The rural nature of the war in Afghanistan means that the insurgents are widely dispersed among numerous villages and towns. Coalition forces in turn must spread themselves out in small bases far from resupply and reinforcements. These bases are vulnerable to concentrated attacks, while the roads are impossible to secure completely over such long distances. Coalition forces cannot live amidst the people or protect the population in sparsely populated rural areas in quite the same way as in cities and towns. US and NATO forces must find ways to operate in a more dispersed manner with greater mobility and speed.

Afghanistan is a diverse landscape, which means that the nature of the fighting varies widely from place to place. In Helmand alone, there are fertile and densely populated river valleys, austere mountains, and barren deserts – each with its own dynamic. The fighting is quite different in the villages than in the towns. The insurgents' tactics are also changing. These differences require tactical flexibility on the part of the Coalition.

Afghanistan's insurgents have been successful when they have managed to identify and exploit vulnerabilities in Coalition defenses, and to use these to seize the upper hand and remain on the offensive. The final pages of this study examine how and why insurgents were able to carry out the attacks described in previous chapters, and why these incidents turned out the way they did. It then suggests some potential countermeasures.

## Ambushes

The hit-and-run ambush has always been the Afghan insurgent's favorite tactic. It is low-risk and does not require much expertise or many fighters. The distances in Afghanistan are so great and the terrain so difficult that it is impossible to completely prevent attacks on convoys. Repeated ambushes can have a debilitating effect on the logistical capabilities of a conventional army. Coalition forces can mitigate the effects of this tactic by launching counter-ambushes, using helicopter escorts, setting up regular checkpoints

manned by reliable Afghan security forces, and patrolling areas off major roads where ambushes are likely to occur.

The Taliban operates an extensive network of informers and forward observers that keep close watch on the movement of Coalition forces, whether by foot, vehicle, or helicopter. It is safe to say that the enemy is aware of most patrols and convoys, and can predict where they will go and by what route. Most forward observers move unarmed, knowing that by doing so they are less likely to be shot or detained. British troops in Helmand frequently shot Taliban scouts, which reduced the number of successful IED attacks and ambushes on foot patrols. When moving on foot, British troops dispersed into sections (squads) moving in depth, so that enemy observers could only identify the location of one section at a time.

Fleeing civilians or an already abandoned village often indicate an impending attack. The insurgents frequently warn civilians before launching ambushes near populated areas. This practice provides opportunities for Coalition forces to receive early warning. In many cases, insurgents have warned nearby civilians without word ever reaching the authorities – an indication that the government and the Coalition have no reliable intelligence network within the population, and probably little popular support. The best means to foil an ambush is timely and accurate intelligence from local people in a position to observe insurgents setting up firing positions. Armed with this information, Coalition troops will be in a position to launch counter-ambushes. Nothing demoralizes and deters an ambush party more than being ambushed.

Afghan insurgents tend to use the same ambush sites repeatedly, especially after successful attacks. The Soviet army rarely kept track of these sites and was routinely hit with surprise attacks at the same locations. It is imperative that Coalition forces keep careful records of all ambush locations, including the firing positions used, and to make this information available to other units moving through the area, preferably in a central database. This information can be used to warn convoys, and to launch counter-ambushes. In the midst of an ambush, artillery and airstrikes can be called in more quickly and accurately if coordinates for previously used firing positions are readily available.

Most ambushes in Afghanistan are hit-and-run, with escape routes already worked out. The insurgents often fire from concealed or fortified positions, reducing the efficacy of counter-fire. The insurgents are most vulnerable when fleeing the area. If Coalition forces can move quickly to encircle the ambush party and block escape routes, they may be able to inflict casualties on the insurgents and deter future attacks. In most hit-and-run attacks, a convoy or foot patrol has perhaps seven to eight minutes to gain fire superiority and move before the insurgents begin to disperse and flee.

When ambushed, Soviet soldiers tended to react passively, relying on crew-served weapons and air and artillery support (which usually arrived after the insurgents had begun to break contact). Soviet infantry rarely maneuvered on the Mujahideen when ambushed. The Mujahideen learned that if they attacked quickly and moved out before

close air support arrived, or fired from fortified positions, they could carry out repeated ambushes while taking few if any casualties. On the other hand, British infantry during the early 20th century tended to quickly maneuver on the insurgents when ambushed. This had a powerful deterrent effect.

Afghan insurgents prefer to fix their target with IEDs, RPGs, and small arms fire – then flank, encircle, and even close. If carrying out a hit-and-run attack, they prefer to inflict casualties during the first few minutes, then flee while laying down cover fire. Fighting through an ambush or waiting for artillery and air support is often the safest option for a convoy that has been ambushed. Such a defensive posture also allows the insurgents to retain the initiative and get away mostly unharmed. Rapid and aggressive maneuver followed by relentless pursuit is one way to seize the upper hand, inflict casualties on the enemy, and reduce the likelihood of future ambushes. Afghan insurgents tend to fear the forceful employment of good infantry tactics more than overwhelming (and relatively indiscriminate) firepower.

Mounted convoys are often more vulnerable than foot patrols. Afghan insurgents tend to focus on vehicles, and often do not notice soldiers or Marines moving on foot. This oversight has at times allowed dismounted infantry to maneuver on the enemy unnoticed.

Many ambushes in Afghanistan are stretched out over miles. The insurgents can lay such an ambush only in remote areas with little or no Coalition presence. Such long ambushes can be extremely damaging. When faced with this tactic, it may not be advisable to fight through the ambush. Better options may be to turn around, wait for air support, or send combat forces ahead on each side of the road to clear possible firing positions.

It is an old tactic to lure forces into a pre-set ambush. Any invitation to a shura in a village where the Taliban has a presence could be a trap. Attacks on district centers may be a trick to lure quick-reaction forces into areas where they will be vulnerable to attack. The same is true for assaults on police outposts. Ambushes might be foiled by changing the shura location at the last minute or making sure it is in a place not easily attacked, going there by a different route, moving with close air support, or not responding at all.

Securing roads and other lines of communication is imperative. The Coalition must have freedom of movement. It will be impossible for Coalition forces to seize and hold the initiative if they are confined to their bases and are unable to move at will. If the insurgents control the roads, the message is that they control the countryside, and in effect the country.

## Attacks on fixed positions

Through repeated attacks on fixed positions, the Taliban have attempted to fix Coalition forces inside their bases. The insurgents have also overrun many police checkpoints and garrisons. Even more than ambushes, serious attacks on bases put Coalition forces on the defensive and hand the initiative to the insurgents. The tactic can be countered by asserting control over the areas around important bases through aggressive measures, such as regularly patrolling areas near the, developing a reliable intelligence network in

populated areas nearby, and launching ambushes (preferably at night when the Taliban conduct most of their movements) on insurgents attempting to get close to the base.

The Taliban in Helmand were able to target British patrol bases relentlessly by controlling the urban areas surrounding these positions. By 2008, the British had managed to push outside of their bases and extend their control far beyond their immediate perimeter. As a result, the number and scale of attacks on the platoon houses decreased dramatically, as did attacks on helicopters taking off and landing. It is imperative for Coalition forces to have enough influence in the surrounding area to at least get word of impending attacks, if not prevent them altogether. Doing so requires additional forces dedicated to securing the base's outer perimeter.

Most serious attacks on fixed positions occur at night, when the insurgents have greater freedom of movement. Countering these attacks may require night ambushes beyond the base's walls. At the very least, it requires night reconnaissance and reliable intelligence from locals living nearby. After enduring many surprise attacks on their platoon houses, British troops learned to develop relationships with locals whose lives or property were threatened by these attacks. The soldiers gave locals flashlights, with instructions to turn them on and off before an impending attack.

The vulnerability of British bases in Helmand's major towns encouraged Taliban attacks on these positions. These attacks forced the British to fire back, destroying buildings and harming civilians. For many non-combatants, it appeared as if the expansion of the Coalition's presence had brought heavy fighting into populated areas, which made civilians less secure than they had been under Taliban control. The fighting attracted new recruits to the insurgency. Had these bases been better protected with sufficient forces to secure an outer perimeter, there would have been fewer attacks, less counter-fire, and less harm to civilian life. In towns that are heavily contested or controlled by the Taliban, it may not be advisable to locate patrol bases inside the city's limits at the outset. A better option might be to wait until clearing operations have created a more secure environment – particularly if there are few forces available to secure the position.

On many occasions, the Taliban squeezed isolated bases by cutting them off from reinforcement and resupply – by, for example, laying IEDs and ambushes on all routes leading to the position. When setting up a patrol base, Coalition forces must consider the security of lines of communication as well as the base's perimeter. A base that cannot be reinforced or resupplied at acceptable cost will have to be shut down eventually.

## Defensive engagements

The Taliban is most vulnerable in its bases and safe areas. Yet these locations are also well guarded, and their leadership is well informed about impending operations and the Coalition's likely route of advance. Afghan insurgents are well versed at escaping through cordons and evading major offensives. On a few occasions, insurgents have stood and fought.

When attacking base areas with the intention of inflicting casualties and seizing weapons, secrecy, surprise, speed, and blocking positions have proven essential. Air assaults have proven particularly effective, as they were for Soviet forces during the 1980s. When the intent is to clear an area and hold it permanently with minimal loss to civilian life, offering advance warning and going in slowly with overwhelming force is sometimes the best means to keep fighting to a minimum and prevent non-combatants from getting caught in the crossfire. Most insurgents will not fight a superior force, short of offering some token resistance, and most civilians will flee if they know there will be heavy fighting.

Large battalion-level sweep operations have proven ineffective at killing or capturing insurgents or seizing weaponry. Large forces move slowly and conspicuously, giving the Taliban plenty of time to move their men and material out of harm's way. Cordons are rarely tight enough to prevent insurgents from escaping – especially over large areas, across difficult terrain, or in lush regions where there is plenty of cover. The Soviet army employed many battalion-level cordon-and-search operations during the 1980s; few had much effect on the Mujahideen. Body counts from these operations tended to be greatly exaggerated. Large offensive operations are most useful for deterring resistance as Coalition forces move to permanently occupy an area previously controlled by the insurgents. Clearing areas without holding them has almost no effect, and is often counterproductive.

When insurgents do stand and fight, it is often to buy time for their leaders to escape. Insurgents protecting base areas tend to engage from ambush positions located some distance away. They Coalition forces launch an offensive with the intention of doing harm (rather than simply seizing ground), they should keep in mind that the insurgents they are fighting may simply be a delaying force. In this case, it might be advisable to push ahead, and to strike quickly at the base itself, while setting up blocking positions to prevent insurgents from escaping.

When cleared out of a base area, Afghan insurgents often return soon afterwards to harass holding forces. Simply because insurgents have fled or offered limited resistance does not mean that an area has been cleared. Clearing an area often takes months or years of painstaking patrols, intelligence gathering, and manning of checkpoints. Coalition forces should be prepared for IED attacks and ambushes along roads and on patrol bases and checkpoints. After taking heavy casualties in massed attacks during 2006, the Taliban learned that attempts to hold ground are futile, and that it is better to relentlessly harass isolated outposts, convoys, and patrols, using small teams of insurgents.

The Taliban employs sentries to watch the main routes into important base areas. It is likely that attack convoys moving along motorable roads will be observed long before they reach their destination. Soviet forces during the 1980s met with little success launching offensives using predictable routes and slow-moving armored convoys. It was not until the late 1980s that the Soviet army learned to assault Mujahideen bases – often at night – using small teams of specially trained forces, which moved on foot along unforeseen routes, such as ridgelines and foot paths. The Soviet military also employed

air assaults to great effect later in the war. These operations inflicted heavy casualties on the Mujahideen.

There is one final point to remember. The insurgents in Afghanistan have continually adapted. They have taken time-tested tactics and adjusted them to new situations and new adversaries. The implication is that Marines will have to watch for new tactics and continually adapt in turn.

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