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Inside the battle zone

SPECIAL REPORT: On patrol in Kandahar, where the insurgency is now more dangerous, and more international

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The grey-uniformed Afghan police, accompanied by Canadian soldiers from the Police Operational Mentor and Liaison Team (POMLT), were working their way on a patrol through the crowded market in Bazaar-e Panjwai. The market, lined with stores selling everything from oranges and pomegranates to colourfully embroidered bicycle seats, runs along both sides of the town's main road, anchored in the west by the main Canadian and Afghan base, and stretching in the east to the dangerous IED-plagued highway that runs to Kandahar city. As the patrol greeted the shopkeepers and watched the children head down the road to the school, a robed man approached. He suddenly raised his arms, shouted "Allahu akbar!" and pressed a trigger that was attached to his bomb vest. The device refused to detonate as he madly mashed the trigger down again and again. The four Canadians opened fire with their assault rifles while the Afghan police moved the terrified crowd back. Even as the terrorist lay bleeding to death on the ground he was still trying to detonate the bomb. His batteries, it turned out later, were dead. According to one soldier, it was as if the pink Energizer drumming bunny had frozen in place at the end of the commercial.

In 2003, Bazaar-e Panjwai was a dusty ghost town at the dead end of a rotting grey tarmac road. Six years later, it is a booming economic and educational centre at the confluence of the volatile Panjwai and Zharey districts, with brand-new paved highways that connect it to Kandahar city and the vital regional trade route, Highway 1. A dead-end burg no longer, children from distant villages attend the school there. Is it any wonder that the insurgents want to interfere with it through infiltration, improvised explosive devices (IEDs) and intimidation? The battle for Bazaar-e Panjwai is on, but it is a battle unlike the larger-scale Operation Medusa back in 2006. Bazaar-e Panjwai is a microcosm of the counter-insurgency fight—and it is a case study of Canadian-Afghan co-operation that is critical to success in Afghanistan. Police are or should be at the forefront of any winning counter-insurgency effort.

There are many non-traditional Canadian military units involved. One of them is Construction Management Team-1. CMT-1, by coincidence, is commanded by a former student of mine, Capt. Megan Harding. She is an airfield construction engineer who leads a motley crew of navy plumbers, air force carpenters, and even submariners in armoured vehicles. Their task: manage and protect a paving project in Panjwai district. Criticized as inefficient and poorly conceived, this much-maligned project has, it turns out, had unintended positive effects on the population in the district. It employs between 400 and 450 people, almost all of whom are from Panjwai.

“We noticed that there was a micro economy emerging to cater to the workers’ needs,” Harding explained. “It was small things at first—like snacks, lunch food and small goods—but then we noticed that the workers were progressively better dressed and wearing closed-toed shoes. They started using bicycles to get to work instead of walking. Now some even have motorcycles.” There were rumours that the district leader demanded kickbacks, but even that was no deterrent—these men are paid at a rate one-third higher than elsewhere, and realized that disposable income was a good thing. So did their wives, apparently. The quality and availability of textiles in the bazaar has markedly improved, something I noticed while I was on several foot patrols through there.

The insurgents noticed, too—and attacked the project. Starting in November 2008, small arms, rocket-propelled grenades (RPGs) and mortar fire were directed against the CMT-1 crew. Then an IED was found near the project’s gravel pit. Another IED detonated when a mechanical loader manoeuvred onto it, injuring the driver. In January, an insurgent blew himself up as he stepped on a pressure plate IED that he had just finished laying at the door of the project office. The insurgents upped the ante and started to kidnap and threaten workers. “But they still showed up,” Harding told me. “There were 23 absences out of 400 workers—even after the attacks.” And the road is getting paved—slowly, but it is getting paved.

Cpl. Joe Wright is a real character: in a Gen X mockery of baby boom imagery, he draws Watchmen-like smiley faces on the yellow-headed 40-mm grenade rounds he carries. Joe is part of the CMT-1 security force and explained how he met the local mullah by accident and discovered that the mosque was in disrepair. “The windows were broken, leaving the building cold and drafty in the winter, which discouraged prayer,” he explained. “And the speaker system was rusted out.” CMT-1, with the help of a Civil-Military Co-operation patrol—the eyes and ears in the field of the Canadian-led Provincial Reconstruction Team—was able to secure money from the Commander’s Contingency Fund to help repair the mosque so the mullah can more effectively counter the message of hate spread by the Taliban. “I could be killed for just talking to you,” he told me. “Inshallah I won’t be, but please thank the Canadian army for helping fix our mosque.” The effects? Goodwill in the community is one . . . but there were more.

I accompanied Capt. Chuck Pitkin and his men working with the Afghan National Army on a patrol in Bazaar-e Panjwai. I wanted to see how the ANA was progressing. In 2006, it was nearly incapable of conducting company-level operations, even with mentoring. Pitkin explained that he now regularly went out on patrols planned by an Afghan company commander and led by Afghan platoon leaders. Like any army, quality will vary, but this group, a platoon from Weapons Company, 2nd (Strike) Kandak, all had body armour, helmets—and Canadian-made C-7 assault rifles. This was not the ragtag force I saw in 2006. It was definitely not the Mad Max-like militia I dealt with back in 2003.

The idea was to assert an armed presence to let the population know that the Afghan government wasn’t intimidated or pinned down in its bases. Predictably, the enemy would try to counter this in order to “message” the population that they were in charge. As the patrol moved on foot through the vine trenches, grape-drying huts and irrigation watercourses south of Bazaar-e Panjwai, word came through that the insurgents had laid an IED ahead of the patrol. The ANA patrol commander rerouted the patrol to bypass the device and then put observation on the site until disposal specialists—a team trained by Canadian combat engineers—could arrive and investigate. “We think they are specifically targeting the Canadian mentors,” Pitkin explained. “They want to kill the teacher so the student can’t learn?” I asked the Afghan patrol sergeant as we walked along. “Yes, sir,” he replied. “We get very angry when they do that. You are our guests here.”

On Dec. 27, Warrant Officer Gaétan Roberge, two Afghan police officers, an interpreter from the POMLT, and Sgt. Gregory Kruse, a combat engineer, were murdered while trying to defuse an IED found by the police near the market. Later, two other Canadian POMLT mentors were seriously wounded in two other separate attacks involving IEDs and shootings. Policing is the key to any counter-insurgency effort—the police have regular contact with the people and are critical to local dispute resolution—but the grievances generated by the lack of dispute resolution are exploited by the Taliban for their purposes.

The threat warning on our patrol, incidentally, came to the police from a relative of someone working on the CMT-1 paving project, and was relayed through the Joint District Coordination Centre, an institution that was non-existent a year and a half ago. I was told that significant amounts of information on enemy activity come through police sources and also directly from the people to the JDCC, but the fact that Afghan cellphone companies caved in to Taliban intimidation and shut down cell coverage between 7 p.m. and 7 a.m. meant that the citizens of Bazaar-e Panjwai were unable to call the police during the night. (Imagine not being able to call the police at night if somebody broke into your house, raped your significant other, and beat up your kids. Would you have confidence in your government?)

But what exactly is the nature of the insurgent threat to Bazaar-e Panjwai? It comes from three groups. First, there are "intimidation teams." These motorcycle-mounted young men in their 20s carry concealed weapons to avoid being openly identified as insurgents and operate at night. They harass, kidnap, and abuse citizens closely identified with the government. Over in Zharey district, for example, pairs of teenagers even monitor the community shuras (meetings) between the citizens and the security forces on behalf of the Taliban in outlying areas. Second, there are the IED emplacers. There are several separate cells. One is engaged in mining the highway east of Bazaar-e Panjwai to isolate it from Kandahar city. The other, which may overlap with the intimidation teams and is indigenous to the area, lays mines and IEDs specifically to kill the patrols in the area and discourage freedom of movement. Finally there are "main force" insurgents. These are trained and organized guerrilla units from outside the area with access to heavy weapons—mortars, RPGs, recoilless rifles—and communications. The purpose of the first two groups is to destabilize the area so that the guerrilla force can mount large-scale actions against the security forces and seize control of the town.

The success in Canadian and Afghan operations here lies in part in the enemy's inability to do the latter, and the fact that the economy and standard of living in Bazaar-e Panjwai keep growing despite the insurgent violence. (Simply measuring the number of "significant action reports" is therefore not a useful way to understand what is happening in Bazaar-e Panjwai.) This is why Canada keeps a potent battle group on tap equipped with Leopard 2 tanks and M-777 artillery—to discourage a buildup of main force insurgents. Each organization has a role to play: Afghan police and Canadian mentors attempt to handle the Taliban's "Hitler Youth"-like intimidators and IED emplacers; Canadian tanks and Afghan infantry take out the insurgent light infantry. The Construction Management Teams, Civil-Military Co-operation teams and district coordination centres support the reconstruction efforts of the Afghan government in Panjwai.

These mechanisms are not without their problems. The main issue, aside from the insurgency, is district governance. Local and tribal personalities jockey for influence, using what amount to Mafia-like extortion and intimidation tactics. This behaviour undercuts the government's legitimacy with the population. Maj. Quentin Innis, a specialist in information operations and Afghan culture, cites the HBO western Deadwood as an analogy to the situation: "That series is about order without law and how an outlaw state progresses toward legitimacy and civilization. That's what we're trying to do here with our Afghan partners." The arrival of an armed militia belonging to a tribal leader from another district had to be faced down and turned back by the Afghan army and the Canadian mentors. In another case, a young man wearing a police uniform shot up the market, wounding a real policeman. He had no connection to the police—or the insurgents. Sending Canadian diplomats and aid workers to provide advice on municipal affairs may be out of order—Canada may need to think about sending mayors and town managers to work alongside the Afghans instead, along with more civilian police.

The pattern of violence that emerges, when one looks at the past 10 years, reveals a number of disturbing trends. Almost all of the 1980s Afghan mujahedeen leaders at the local level, men who were not backed by the Pakistani Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI)—and who had the respect of the population and could lead—have been killed, as have their more prominent national-level counterparts, leaving their old ISI-supported rivals like Jalaluddin Haqqani and Gulbuddin Hekmatyar still alive. The Taliban deliberately target educators and medical personnel, thus eliminating or driving away the only educated professional class. There has been a systematic assassination campaign against the police force's middle management, particularly the administrative staff, where most of the educated police congregate. Similarly, there has been another assassination campaign directed against moderate, educated clerics in southern Afghanistan over the past two years. This is just a slow-motion version of what Pol Pot wanted to accomplish in Cambodia with "Year Zero," enforced with his teenaged killers. Deliberately eliminating the educated portions of a society that already has an illiteracy rate of over 80 per cent is nothing short of diabolical. It is not morally different from what Nazi Germany and the Soviets did to the Polish intelligentsia during the Second World War.

Incidentally, I was shown a captured Taliban manual detailing various ways of attacking our vehicles and firing rockets and mortars at our bases. There were complex mathematical firing tables in it. The enemy doesn't appear to be illiterate.

I participated in an operation that was designed to disrupt the enemy buildup and draw off heat from the Panjwai-Zharey district confluence. After the helicopters left the landing zone, I accompanied American and Canadian troops into a village complex in western Zharey district. A dog search team working with the Afghan police uncovered a small but significant insurgent cache. The stash amounted to a terrorist "starter kit." I spoke with an American civilian counter-IED specialist as I picked up one of the IED components after he had cleared the site. "Where is this from?" I asked. "It doesn't look 'improvised' at all. It looks machined." "Oh those," the specialist exclaimed. "I saw them in Iraq. They're mass-produced in an Iranian factory. They even have advertising that's sent out to insurgent groups bragging about how effective they are." An IED brand? Exactly how many Canadians have been murdered using Iranian IED components? Or how many Afghan soldiers and Canadian mentors have been wounded by Iranian mortar bombs fired from Chinese mortars against our strong points over in Panjwai? And the Chinese 82-mm recoilless rifles used against our vehicles? These weapons weren't dug out of the ground from mouldering 1980s mujahedeen caches. They come from somewhere else, not Afghanistan.

Since the Canadian Forces in Kandahar have no mandate to operate outside of Afghanistan against the insurgent support networks in Pakistan and elsewhere, we must rely on diplomacy. What is Canada's foreign policy apparatus doing to help staunch this arms flow? Very little, apparently, and this is a weakness in Canada's approach to Afghanistan. Canada has, ostensibly, a "whole of government" approach in Kandahar whereby the Canadian government departments co-operate in the pursuit of Canadian interests. Canada doesn't appear to have a "whole of government" approach to deal with the strategic and regional aspects of the conflict. Indeed, those departments seem stuck in the 1990s. We have not seen a comprehensive information campaign from the Department of Foreign Affairs explaining how the Taliban manipulate and abuse young men for their terroristic purposes—but we do hear all about the plight of child soldiers in Africa. There is no evidence of a serious Canadian diplomatic offensive directed toward the recalcitrant Pakistani government that governs a country where the madrasas continue to pump out seemingly unlimited numbers of brainwashed fighters to fight our forces in Afghanistan, and where money continues to flow from certain Gulf countries to support those madrasas and radical Islamist groups: this, nearly half a decade after we commenced operations in Kandahar province.

Canadian diplomats led the charge in getting the United Nations to adopt the "responsibility to protect" doctrine and moralized about genocide in Africa on numerous occasions. Does this doctrine not apply to Afghanistan too, with all the accompanying moral rhetoric that Canadians like to muster? Why is Canada's foreign policy apparatus less strident in the case of Afghanistan?

Similarly, where are our public démarches against Iran and China for permitting Iranian- and Chinese-made weapons to be smuggled into Afghanistan and fired at Canadian sons and daughters as they go about the business of reconstruction? Pakistan, China and Iran are not supportive of Canadian interests in the region and we should signal our displeasure as often and as loudly as possible, with as many Canadian voices as possible. Their ordnance is killing Canadian soldiers and Afghan civilians.

After I finished with the American IED specialist, I encountered an elderly man, who asked that I not use his name out of fear of retaliation by, as he put it, "the young ones." He had a tanned, deeply lined face, an impeccably clean turban, and a gregarious laugh. Through my interpreter, Habib, I asked what it was like during the 1980s. "Oh, that was our time, back then," he said, his eyes lighting up, and he regaled me with tales of valour against the hated infidel enemy, fading events now nearly forgotten except in local oral tradition.

“Please tell me this,” I asked him. “The Taliban and others say that we are as bad as the Soviets. Do you agree?” He looked at me and cackled with an old man’s laugh. “My friend, no. The Soviets behaved like crazy dogs [one of the lowest forms of life in Afghan culture], shooting people randomly and bombing randomly from the air with their planes and helicopters. You do not. We know you are here to help, but we need your help here in the villages, with the people. Our largest problem is we lack leadership. Most are dead—and I am too old to provide it. My time has passed. Afghanistan will continue to bleed until there is leadership and unity.”