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Panjwayi Alamo

The Defence of Strongpoint Mushan

Sean M. Maloney

Throughout 2008, a small band of Canadians living and working alongside soldiers of the Afghan National Army (ANA) occupied an isolated outpost in Panjwayi district designated Strongpoint Mushan. Once the pivotal leg of an ambitious security and development plan, Strongpoint Mushan quickly became an orphan as priorities changed, the plan shifted, and the weight of available friendly forces moved to the eastern part of the district. At the same time, abandoning Strongpoint Mushan after such a lengthy occupation would not only result in a Taliban propaganda victory, but would also remove the only coalition presence in that part of Panjwayi, a presence that was aggravating the Taliban leadership in its attempts to challenge Canada and Afghanistan for control of the vital districts west of Kandahar City. There was no good solution to this dilemma, so the position was kept manned and resupplied in an increasingly dangerous environment, even when it was cut off on the ground. This is the story of the Canadian soldiers of the Operational Mentor and Liaison Teams (OMLT) and the Afghan soldiers they worked with in the defence of Strongpoint Mushan.¹

Why Mushan?

Mushan is geographically important to coalition efforts west of Kandahar City. Looking

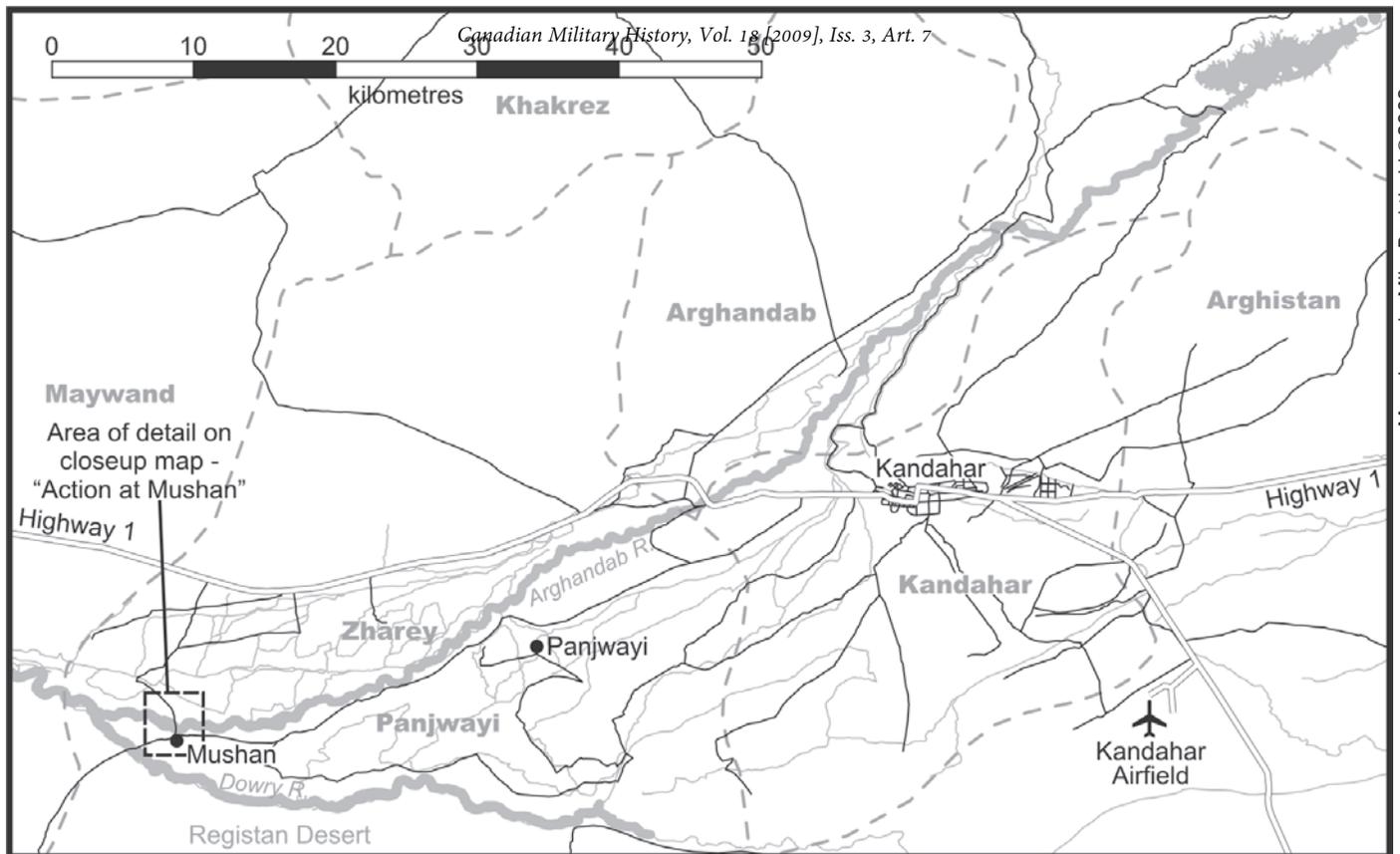
Abstract: The future of Afghanistan rests in the country's ability to field effective national security forces. Canada has played a significant role in mentoring the Afghan National Army (ANA) since 2003. By 2008, the ANA was operating in battalion strength in Kandahar province. Strongpoint Mushan was a vital position that interfered with enemy activity in the region and the men from the Operational Mentoring and Liaison Team and their Afghan counterparts held that ground in the face of vast amounts of firepower directed at their positions.

at a map, the embattled triangular Zharey district lies south of Ring Road South (Highway 1), the main International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) service route to the forces fighting in Helmand province and the primary commerce artery in and through Afghanistan. Panjwayi district, also triangular in shape, lies to the south of Zharey district, with the Arghandab River separating the two. The forbidding Registan Desert is directly south of Panjwayi district, with the Dowry River separating the two. The tapered western point of Panjwayi district marks the confluence of the Arghandab and Dowry rivers – it is also the meeting place of Zharey, Panjwayi, and the Band-e Timor communities from Maywand district. Maywand leads to the Helmand river valley, and routes from that region branch to Baram Cha in Pakistan (see map on next page).

The enemy needed to facilitate the movement of enemy personnel, supplies and weapons from Baram Cha–Helmand Valley–Maywand into Panjwayi. Once in Panjwayi, there are other routes that lead into both the southwest suburbs of Kandahar City and to the “rocket box” northwest of Kandahar Air Field where 107 mm rockets are fired at this vital ISAF logistics and support facility. This route is also one of several used by those engaged in the transport of narcotics to Pakistan. A strongpoint at Mushan is extremely inconvenient for the Taliban, the Hezb-e-Islami Gulbuddin (HiG) and other anti-government and criminal elements.

In 2006, Mushan was quiet as the Operation Medusa battles raged in Pashmul and Sperwan Ghar. It was widely believed that the “police” presence in Mushan at that time was really a militia belonging to elements in the provincial power structure that had some relationship to the narcotics trade. Mushan was important to them as product could not move along Ring Road South or through Zharey district because of the fighting that raged there throughout the year.

In mid-2007, Task Force Kandahar (TFK) formulated a plan to construct a road from Panjwayi town to Mushan, and then another from Mushan to Ring Road South. In general the idea was to facilitate commerce and security in this extremely fertile district. Mushan was the pivot for this project and its enhanced stature in the plan resulted in the construction



of better defensive facilities there. In time, Afghan National Police replaced the local "police," the defensive works were designated a "police sub-station" and a National Directorate of Security detachment moved in. This in turn increased enemy interest in Mushan which was demonstrated by a significant rise in insurgent violence in the western part of Panjwayi district. Subsequently the decision was made to designate the police sub-station as a strongpoint and then deploy Afghan National Army troops to Mushan.

In early 2008, Strongpoint Mushan was one of a line of police sub-stations and strongpoints along the Panjwayi-Mushan road. Enemy forces mounted a campaign against this chain of facilities, which escalated throughout the spring of 2008. Mechanized forces had to be used to resupply and replace personnel along this chain which in turn attracted enemy Improvised Explosives Device (IED) cells. The battle along the Panjwayi-Mushan road nearly became a sub-campaign unto itself partly because the absence of Canadian helicopters forced TFK

to mount costly ground resupply operations. There were no fewer than 14 IED attacks directed against Canadian vehicles during this period. Eventually, the decision was made to cease ground resupply and a variety of aerial solutions were explored, including the use of contracted civilian Mi-8 helicopters.

The situation also resulted in the redeployment of forces away from some of the police sub-stations along the Mushan-Panjwayi road which added to the physical and psychological isolation of Strongpoint Mushan. There were higher level considerations. The Canadian government was a minority government anticipating an election campaign some time in 2008 in which the costly commitment to Afghanistan would undoubtedly be an issue. Any enemy analysis of Canadian media would have concluded that casualties inflicted against Canadian forces would have a strategic effect on Canada's commitment to a combat role. At the same time, Canadian and Afghan forces could not retreat from Mushan for operational and psychological reasons. These factors

collided in the fight over Mushan, with the Canadian soldiers from the OMLT and the Afghan soldiers from the Kandaks caught in the middle. Mushan had to hold.

The OMLT and the Kandaks

Coalition soldiers have been used to train the emergent Afghan National Army since 2002. When Operation Enduring Freedom (OEF) was the main coalition effort in Afghanistan, Embedded Training Teams (ETTs) were the primary connection point between the ANA and the coalition forces at the tactical level. As NATO ISAF gradually supplanted OEF and more non-North American countries joined the effort, new terminology emerged – the Operational Mentor and Liaison Team or OMLT.

The ETTs were similar to Vietnam-era Special Forces A-Teams working with non-professional indigenous forces. Indeed, the burden of ETT work initially fell on the 19th and 20th Special Forces Groups in the early days of the war. As the ANA emerged

as an institution, the ETTs shifted to a more conventional posture as the intent was to create a professional army to replace the Special Forces-backed militias. A US National Guard brigade took over this mission from the special forces by 2004. The NATO-led OMLTs were originally supposed to supplement the OEF ETTs and provide mentoring at brigade and higher levels, but as NATO took greater control of the coalition effort, the NATO OMLTs increasingly handled tasks previously done by the ETTs. Confusingly, ETTs and OMLTs shared the same battlespace throughout Afghanistan.

Canada's involvement with mentoring at the tactical level dates back to 2003-4 when a Canadian ETT worked with ANA units in Kabul. At that time, the Canadian ETT consisted of 15 personnel led by a major who worked closely with a "kandak," the ANA equivalent of a battalion. That commitment evolved into significant Canadian involvement with the Kabul Military Training Centre from 2003 to 2006, where Canadians worked alongside American, French and British soldiers and their Afghan counterparts to raise, train, and equip the kandaks that would form the manoeuvre forces of the ANA.

For a variety of reasons related to the deterioration of the situation in Kandahar province, Canada committed more resources to the expansion of OMLTs in the fall of 2006. By this time 205 ANA Corps was stood up and the kandaks assigned to operations in Regional Command South came under its control. 1st Brigade of 205 Corps, or 1/205 Brigade, was established by

2007 to handle ANA operations in the province. 1/205 Brigade's kandaks varied in number, however, and it would be a mistake to assume that 1/205 Brigade had the same level of stability that a Canadian brigade has. In 2006, it wavered between one and three kandaks. At that time the Canadian OMLT was capable of mentoring a single kandak.

The OMLT requirements increased dramatically in 2007, to the point where nearly an entire Canadian infantry battalion was required to reorganize into OMLTs to mentor the various components of 1/205 Brigade. 3rd Battalion, Princess Patricia's Canadian Light Infantry, an organization whose soldiers and officers had on average two tours in Afghanistan, was selected. 3 PPCLI was the first Canadian infantry battalion to have any contact with Afghans back in 2002. Subsequently, "B" Company was the force protection company for the Provincial Reconstruction Team when it was first established in 2005. In other words, these soldiers had experience working with Afghans, and specifically Afghans from Kandahar province, in non-traditional situations.

In 2008, 1/205 Brigade consisted of five kandaks totalling, on a good day, around 2,900 personnel. There

were three infantry kandaks 1/1, 1/2 and 1/3, a combat support kandak (4/1) and a combat service support kandak (5/1). For transport, each kandak had a varying number of Ford Ranger pickup trucks, Hummers armed with 12.7 mm machine guns, and International 7-ton trucks. Paper organizational charts are, however, deceiving when dealing with Afghan units. In general, not all three infantry kandaks were deployed at once. Some were undergoing refit, others had personnel on leave. There were always a percentage of personnel absent without leave for reasons that cannot always be attributed to shirking of duty. Local conditions meant that it could take days for soldiers on leave just to get home. The CS and CSS kandaks at this point were not fully manned nor were the more specialized trades like engineers and logisticians fully trained.

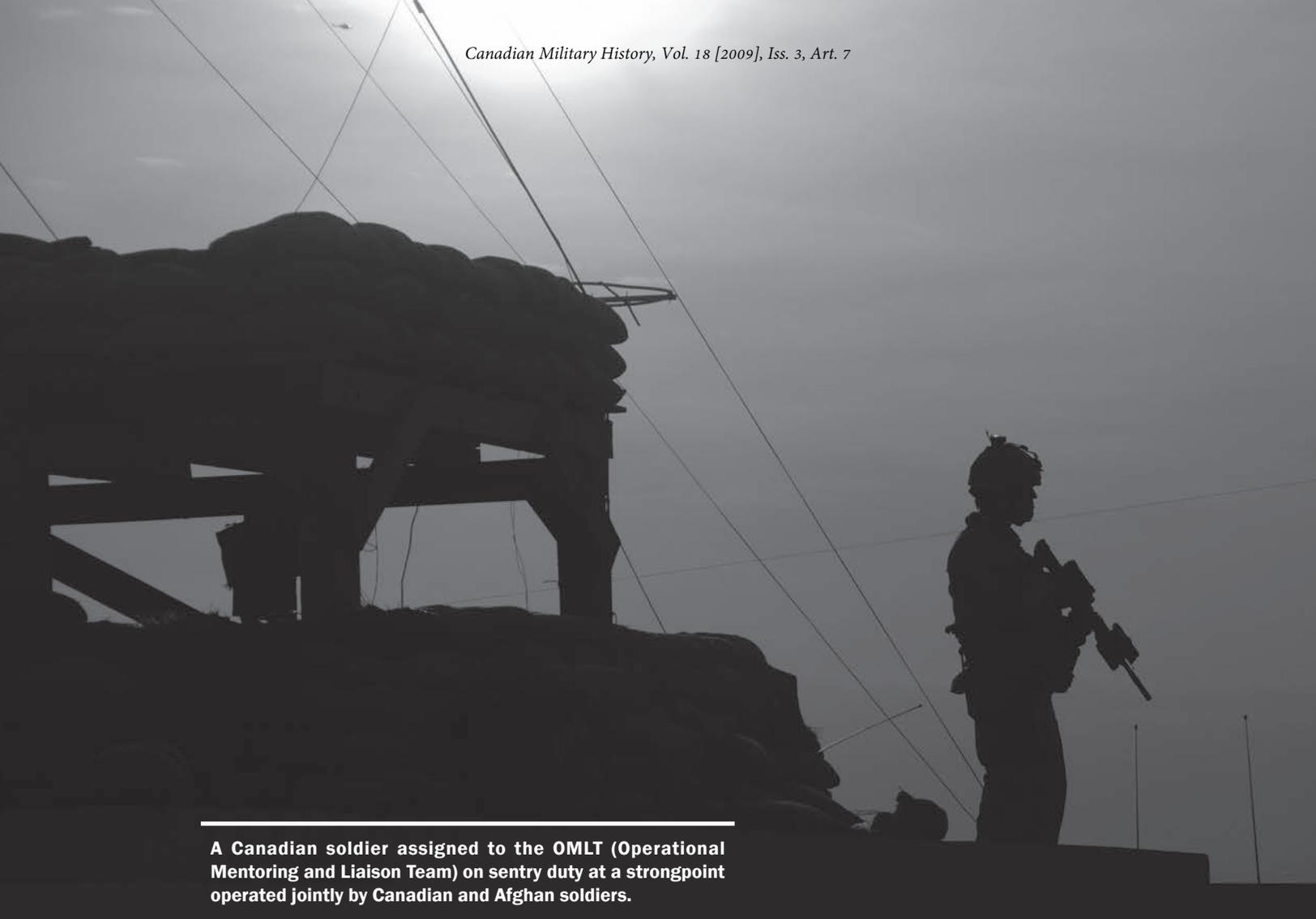
Introducing 1/1 Kandak and the Kandak 1/1/205 OMLT Team²

The Kandak assigned to Zharey district in the spring and summer of 2008 was 1/1 Kandak, commanded by Colonel Anwar. 1/1 had three infantry companies,

Brigadier-General Gul Aqa Nibi, commander of 205 Corp (Kandak 2-1-205) Afghan National Army, gives an interview to Canadian reporters after the Transfer of Command Authority Ceremony held at Joint Task Force Afghanistan HQ, Kandahar Airfield, Afghanistan, 11 May 2008.



Photo by Corporal S.J. McNeil, Canadian Forces Joint Imagery Centre (CFJIC) AR2008-M005-06



A Canadian soldier assigned to the OMLT (Operational Mentoring and Liaison Team) on sentry duty at a strongpoint operated jointly by Canadian and Afghan soldiers.

each of about 70 men; a weapons company of 188 personnel divided into four platoons; a headquarters and headquarters company and a combat service support company of around 70 men. 1/1 and its support companies were based out of Forward Operating Base (FOB) Masum'Ghar, with two companies deployed to FOB Sperwan Ghar and another to Strongpoint Mushan. Three of the weapons company platoons occupied strongpoints along the Panjwayi-Mushan road. 1/1 Kandak's leadership included a tactically and politically proficient executive officer who kept things together. 1/1 Kandak's strength lay in its non-commissioned officers (NCOs) and their regimental sergeant-major (RSM). The operations sergeant and company sergeants-major were rated as strong. Their officers, however,

were generally weak. They suffered from poor French training in Kabul and some were appointed because of political or tribal relationships. The OMLT constantly strove to present to the Afghans a national outlook. That said, an estimated 60 percent of 1/1 was Pashtun, and Uzbeks dominated the other 40 percent. Dari was the language of choice, with Pashtun used informally. Notably, the NCOs publicly declared that "We are one Army" and generally did not engage in divisive ethnicity issues.

1/1 Kandak was fairly experienced. It was formed in Kabul back in 2002 where it initially acted as part of President Hamid Karzai's protection force. 1/1 spent a lot of time projecting from Kabul to provinces in Regional Command East when a surge was required. In 2005 it was sent to Oruzgan province, where

it worked with a Dutch OMLT and an American ETT. While in Oruzgan, 1/1 focused on becoming proficient at platoon-level operations. Two companies of 1/1 were deployed to retake the Chora District Centre in an action that took place in 2007. This required what was euphemistically called "heavy mentoring" by the ETT and the Dutch OMLT. It was not proficient at independent kandak-level operations when it re-deployed to Kandahar in November 2007. 1/1 entered the line in Panjwayi district in late February 2008.

The Canadian OMLT paralleled the kandak structure. Kandak 1/1/205 OMLT Team, as it was formally known, was commanded initially by Major Mark Campbell (until he was critically wounded in June and then replaced by Major David Proctor) and consisted of 26 Canadian soldiers.

Right: A Canadian sergeant of the Operation Mentor and Liaison Team (OMLT) (right) comes back from an operation with Canadian and Afghan soldiers.

Below right: An OMLT RG-31 Nyala light armoured vehicle parks in front of a line of Afghan National Army Ford Ranger trucks mounting 12.7 mm machine guns at a leaguer near the village of Nakhonay, in the Panjawai district.

Sixteen of these were the company mentors, with each team consisting of four men and an RG-31 Nyala armoured vehicle: their callsigns were 71A through 71D. The OMLT also had a five-man command post with an RG-31 armoured patrol vehicle and an eight-wheeled Bison, callsign 71. There were three specialized mentors (logistics, medical, and operations) and a sergeant-major mentor. Each company team consisted of a captain, a warrant officer, and two corporals or privates. However, the leave plan and field injuries meant that on many occasions the four-man teams could be reduced to one or two men. Similarly, not all of the vehicles were operational as the OMLT had no integral electrical and mechanical engineering support and could not always draw on other Canadian resources, especially if 1/1 Kandak was operating away from the Canadian battlegroup. In effect, a skeletal Canadian light infantry company mentored a motorized Afghan kandak that was operating in a static role.

Working with Afghan soldiers was an eye-opening experience to Canadian soldiers trained in the context of Western culture and a European-based military system. The ANA had uniforms, most of which were various versions of the American woodland pattern battledress, and wore different coloured berets. All the men had helmets and 95 percent had body armour in the infantry companies though bravado discouraged them from wearing the protective gear.



Chest rigs predominated instead of traditional webbing.

Culturally, the Afghan troops were uneducated reflecting what had happened to the country over the past 20 years. The mentors noted problems with learning, problem solving, and abstract thinking. The Afghan soldiers had difficulty conceptualizing second and third order effects, but more importantly many had trouble associating ground with its depiction on a map. Math skills were limited. "The planning cycle," as one mentor explained, "was moment to moment." Again, this was not surprising since the young men emerged from a survivalist culture where life expectancy was short and the Taliban discouraged the study of anything other than the Koran.

The Afghan soldiers were extremely polite and respectful of elders. They understood "place" and rank, and tended to be non-confrontational. They would go out of their way not to humiliate guests in any way, as hospitality was a cornerstone of not only the Pashtunwali code, but of Afghan society generally. Their faith was an integral aspect of their daily lives, to the point where it could interfere with operations. Soldiers would pray collectively before, after, and even during patrols – a sentry would be deployed as the prayer mats were pulled out.

For the most part, the Afghan soldiers understood the basics and they could work as a team. The main problems lay in planning, combat service support, and their tendency



This picture, taken from a Canadian CH-47 Chinook and facing west, shows the confluence of the Arghandab and Dowry Rivers where the Reg Desert, Maywand district, Zharey District, and western Panjwayi District meet. Mushan is indicated by an arrow.

to be reactive. The danger in any OMLT was that the mentors would take over the problem-solving tasks and the teams had to be vigilant in passing on this responsibility to the Afghan leaders. Clearly, there was no impetus to improve if the Canadians did everything for them. The Afghan NCOs did lead by example and that was considered to be a major positive factor.

The war around Mushan in early 2008 revolved around efforts to affect a relief-in-place (RIP) of the forces stationed in Mushan. The outgoing OMLT and ANA company from another kandak was replaced with a new rotation in early March. This was a complex operation involving a strong mechanized force that encountered significant enemy

resistance. By the end of March 1/1 Kandak had a company in Mushan, another in and around Panjwayi town and bazaar, and another deployed up at a district centre in Ghorak. The kandak and its mentors initiated a patrolling programme along the Panjwayi-Mushan road, but with the lack of police in these locations, the best the teams could provide was a temporary day-time presence. Another task was to provide overwatch security to the Panjwayi-Mushan road paving project that had just started near Panjwayi town. On occasion, coalition operations damaged property in the battle area. As the kandak and the OMLT had no integral Civil-Military Cooperation (CIMIC) capability, they also sent out assessment patrols to note damage

and pass the information back to the CIMIC teams at the Provincial Reconstruction Team.

Mushan: Environs, Occupants, and Initial Operations

The strongpoint itself is located two kilometres east of Mushan village, next to the unpaved road. The Mushan Bazaar is approximately 300 metres northwest of the position. On market days the bazaar, which is the economic centre for the area, swells to 400 people. Just south of the bazaar is a building that used to be used as a clinic. A small Kutchi³ camp is situated to the northeast. For the most part, the terrain is flat

and consists of traditional Afghan compound complexes with high mud walls, grape growing trenches, grape drying huts, and walled growing areas for the crops.

Strongpoint Mushan is 100 metres by 150 metres square. The main wall is made from Hescobastion and has two observation towers: one to the north, the other south. There are three run-up positions used by Ford Ranger vehicles with DsHkA and PKM machine guns mounted on them. A pit with a 60 mm mortar occupies the centre. It has no air conditioning and is infested with sand fleas and ugly camel spiders. The ANA and the OMLT lived in modular tents, but there were several bunkers which consisted of a layer of sandbags, one man high. Concertina wire surrounded the perimeter, backed up with Claymore area defence weapons. ANA strength varied between 62 and 68, amounting to two platoons. The

the insurgent activities through Key Leader Engagements (KLEs) and by casual contact with the population. The Afghan soldiers, being more conversant with local culture than Canadians, had insight into the situation that an array of technical collection means could not match. For example, around 7 March, an ANA company commander held an impromptu shura at the bazaar. The local merchants told him that the enemy would mount significant operations against the strongpoint in a month's time. The merchants were upset by this development and asked the Taliban to stay away from Mushan. This information was confirmed by a follow-up patrol. The remains of two failed 107 mm rocket launches, discovered on separate patrols, pointed towards a higher probability of future enemy action.

The locals within the three to four kilometre security "bubble" around the strongpoint were

generally apathetic but at the same time expressed positive sentiments about the ANA's presence. Whoever was in charge, or appeared to be in charge, they would back. They were caught between the insurgents and the Afghan government and in effect determined that in Mushan it was too risky to take a position. It was easier to do nothing and just carry on with day-to-day life.

Further patrolling and KLEs started to flesh out information about the enemy. There was a spotter or facilitator close to the strongpoint, and an estimated 12-15 insurgents within Mushan itself. Information suggested that the regular patrolling had a deterrent effect on this cell's operations, that they were somewhat frustrated, and wanted help. They were particularly concerned about the coalition presence at the bazaar for unknown reasons. A week later, two men who were evidently monitoring the

ANA company at Mushan had a mix of PKM, DshKa, KpV 14.7 mm, and .50 cal machine guns augmented with RPG-7 rocket launchers. The first OMLT team into Mushan⁴ was 71B, led by Captain Craig Robertson, and included Warrant Officer Rob Crane, Corporal "Rusty" Myroniuk, and Corporal Shaun Copeland. Generally, the Canadian OMLT team had three to four personnel stationed at Mushan. The OMLT personnel had their personal weapons, plus a Carl Gustav rocket launcher and M203 grenade launcher attachments for their weapons.

For the most part, the platoons at Mushan ranged out three to four kilometres from the strongpoint. These "framework" patrols in and around Mushan and the bazaar produced significant information on



A US Army OH-58D Kiowa Warrior in Afghanistan.



Canadian soldiers of the OMLT and Afghan National Army soldiers walk through a poppy field during an operation in the Panjwayi district, Afghanistan, 1 May 2008.

movements of a patrol were detained. ISTAR reports about enemy interest in Strongpoint Mushan's activities started to pick up in the area around mid-March.

71B and the 3rd Company soldiers then had a contact on 25 March three kilometres south of the strongpoint. Five insurgents armed with a PKM machine gun engaged the patrol from a compound. When the ANA deployed and fired back, the enemy withdrew. The Afghans caught a man who had enemy logistics documents in his possession. The following day, another ANA patrol and 71B were engaged by what was believed to be ten insurgents firing RPGs and PKMs from behind walls and a grape-drying hut. During the 40-minute firefight, 71B fired M203 grenade launchers at the hut as a pair of OH-58Ds from Company "B" 2-17

Cavalry ("The Banshees") arrived on the scene. Using the splash of the grenades as a marker, the helicopters made six runs on the target firing .50 cal machine guns and rocket pods as the ANA kept the enemy pinned down. Enemy firing ceased and, because the ANA patrol was critically short of ammunition, it withdrew while covered by an MQ-1 Predator UAV. One suspected insurgent was apprehended by a hastily-established vehicle check point and three enemy were seen to flee from the engagement in the direction of a Kutchi camp located near the Reg desert. Follow up KLEs suggested that the locals were concerned about the unusual increase in insurgent activity around Mushan.

Notably, the ANA started to bring Afghan National Police (ANP) along with them during search operations,

There was, however, a striking difference in the professionalism of the two forces. On one joint patrol, the ANA were appalled by the police behaviour towards women and lack of respect for property. The discussion between the two forces became quite vocal on one occasion.

At the beginning of April, the coalition mounted Operation Toor Azadi along Route Fosters. Toor Azadi was designed to resupply all of the police sub-stations and strongpoints and conduct a RIP for individuals and sub-units. 3rd Company was supposed to be part of this RIP. 71B and the ANA extended patrols to the east of Mushan as part of this effort. Unfortunately, as vehicle casualties mounted from IED attacks, the force halted to the east less than half way to Mushan. On 3 April, the link up between the forces

occurred and 71A, consisting of Captain Matt Aggus, Warrant Officer John McNabb and Master Corporal Trevor Saina replaced 71B, while 3rd Company RIP'd with 1st Company.

The team and its Afghan counterparts mounted daily framework patrols and compound searches throughout April. Intelligence revealed that the enemy was annoyed at the continued presence of the force and planned to bring a mortar into the area but their logistics system was having problems deploying the weapon and its ammunition.

Resupply was a significant problem for the men occupying Strongpoint Mushan. The American and British transport helicopters supporting operations in Regional Command (South) would not fly in to Mushan unless they had AH-64 Apache support. The operational tempo in RC(S) in the spring and summer of 2008 meant that there were few AH-64s available for a mundane resupply task. The

Helicopter Landing Site at

civilian contractor-flown Mi-8 HIP helicopters, to resupply the combat outposts and strongpoints. One "Jingle Air" HIP dropped its load in a panic when confronted with a volley of RPGs on approach to another combat outpost. The enemy set an ambush which deterred recovery of the supplies, and then raided the pallet and exploited the contents of the mail bag for PSYOPS purposes against the Canadians manning the outpost.

After this debacle, aerial resupply of the strongpoints along FOSTERS was limited to the "emergency AMR" – a US Army UH-60 from Task Force Eagle Assault, escorted by a pair of OH-58D Kiowa Warriors from The Banshees (if AH-64 Apaches were unavailable as was usually the case), would land at the Mushan helicopter landing site, the crew chief would kick out boxes of ammo, and the Blackhawk would immediately lift off covered by the

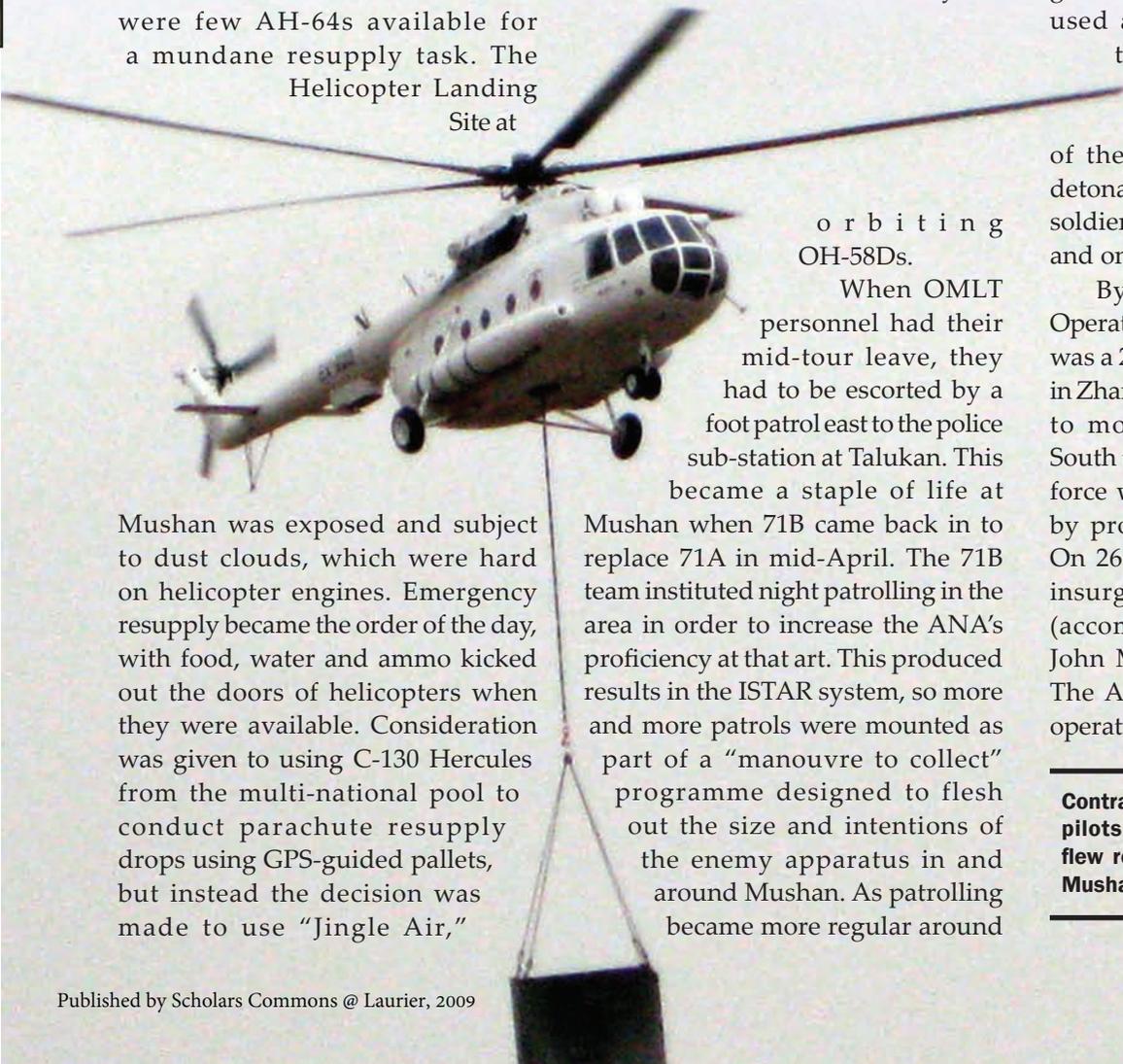
the bazaar, enemy forces from across the river in Zharey started to engage from a distance. The mentors recommended that the patrol plan include those areas, but the ANA company commander was reluctant to do so without air support so for the rest of April patrols focused on the bazaar and areas west of the town.

In May, the 71A team, consisting of Aggus, McNabb, Saina and Corporal Dan Meeking, a medic who was attached from the Police OMLT, replaced 71B at Mushan during Operation Toor Azadi II. (Corporal Tyler Latta arrived back from leave later on and Meeking rotated out). There was an immediate spike in reports of unarmed enemy personnel observing this RIP operation, but again there was little enemy activity with the exception of an IED attack against a patrol from "B" Company, 2 PPCLI, an ANA section, and mentors from 71A. This was a particularly gruesome attack in which the enemy used a ten-year-old boy to carry the explosives. This child was pushed ahead by an older man in the direction of the patrol, and then remotely detonated. The attack killed an ANA soldier and wounded two Canadians and one Afghan.⁵

By this time preparations for Operation Nolai was in progress. This was a 2 PPCLI battlegroup operation in Zharey district which was designed to move south from Ring Road South towards Mushan. The Mushan force was to play a supporting role by providing a feint to the south. On 26 May, however, a number of insurgents shot at an ANA patrol (accompanied by Warrant Officer John McNabb) from a compound. The Afghans mounted a clearance operation with "minimal prompting"

Contracted Mi-8s and Mi-17s flown by pilots from the former Soviet Union flew resupply missions to Strongpoint Mushan

Photo by Cpl Simon Duchesne, CFJIC AR2008-Z140-07



o r b i t i n g
OH-58Ds.

When OMLT personnel had their mid-tour leave, they had to be escorted by a foot patrol east to the police sub-station at Talukan. This became a staple of life at Mushan when 71B came back in to replace 71A in mid-April. The 71B team instituted night patrolling in the area in order to increase the ANA's proficiency at that art. This produced results in the ISTAR system, so more and more patrols were mounted as part of a "manoeuvre to collect" programme designed to flesh out the size and intentions of the enemy apparatus in and around Mushan. As patrolling became more regular around

Mushan was exposed and subject to dust clouds, which were hard on helicopter engines. Emergency resupply became the order of the day, with food, water and ammo kicked out the doors of helicopters when they were available. Consideration was given to using C-130 Hercules from the multi-national pool to conduct parachute resupply drops using GPS-guided pallets, but instead the decision was made to use "Jingle Air,"

and their leadership retained a “cool demeanour” during the engagement. The enemy fled north into Zharey with “B” Company supported by an MQ-1 Predator in close pursuit. Within two days, the insurgents attacked the strongpoint with small arms fire from the direction of the old clinic.

The situation around Mushan deteriorated again on 31 May. Between 15 and 20 insurgents split between four compounds ambushed a 20-man Afghan patrol and three Canadian mentors in a three-sided ambush, while the strongpoint simultaneously received harassing sniper fire. The ANA patrol endured ten minutes of small arms and RPG fire before the patrol sergeant organized his PKM machine guns to respond during a lull in the fire. The mentors joined

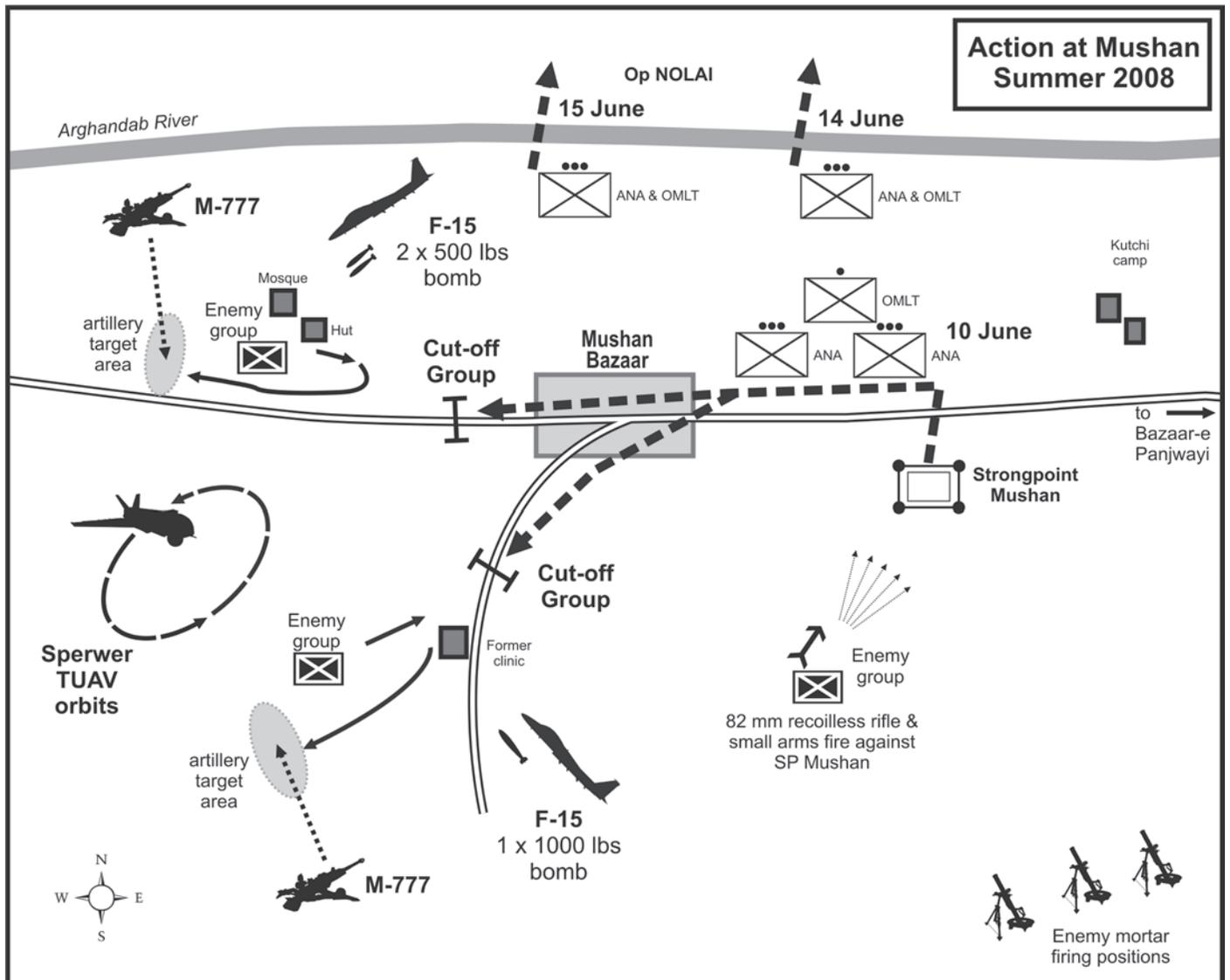
in with an M-72 LAW and a M203 grenade launcher. An enemy sniper then started to pick away at the Afghans who had gone to ground in a nearby wadi. The two M-777 guns from “C” Troop, “B” Battery, 1 RCHA under the command of Lieutenant Candice Dunn (who later became known as “The Angel of Death” by the some of the soldiers her troop was supporting) fired smoke to screen the ANA as they broke contact, leap-frogging back in good order in two groups. ISTAR reports indicated that a Taliban cell leader and five other insurgents were killed during the course of these engagements. They were attempting their own version of a Key Leader Engagement at the time the patrol appeared.

The next day, several mortar rounds landed near the strongpoint.

The Sperwan Ghar M-777s fired several smoke missions to screen the compound from any potential observers or mortar fire controllers. Subsequently an insurgent commander told the shopkeepers at the Mushan bazaar to close up and go home because “the war has started.”

The Defence of Strongpoint Mushan

The number of engagements from the north bank of the river continued to mount in early June. In almost every case a patrol that was involved in a “Troops in Contact” (TIC) event was mortared once it returned to the strongpoint. None of these rounds initially made their way into the compound, but incoming



Map drawn by Mike Bechthold ©2009

rounds were seen to bracket it 100 metres in each direction. This was an indicator that a trained enemy mortar fire controller was present in the area.

Between 8 and 10 June, ISTAR reports indicated that the enemy was annoyed at what they perceived to be the pro-government tilt of the population in Mushan and intended to go into the bazaar and intimidate the merchants. One theory was that the intended second order effect was to have merchants stop selling fresh food to the ANA in the strongpoint in order to aggravate the supply situation. A local source complained to the Joint District Coordination Centre in Panjwayi about the intimidation.

As a result of this information, the company in the strongpoint surged two platoons into Mushan Bazaar as a show of force to demonstrate to the population that the government would not be intimidated. As the two cut-off groups deployed (see map) they came under enemy fire. One platoon, moving in behind the bazaar, took rounds from a grape hut to the west, while the second platoon received small arms and RPG fire from positions west of the old clinic. A Canadian Sperwer Tactical Unmanned Aerial Vehicle (TUAV) was orbiting the battle, and a pair of US Air Force F-15s were available, but there were problems in employing the firepower because of the close proximity of the engaged forces. The firefights stalemated after about 30 minutes, and then the strongpoint started taking fire. The Afghans in the run-up position machine guns were able to identify and engage one of the compounds where the enemy was shooting from, as did the platoon near the bazaar. The enemy then started to exfiltrate from the position opposite the bazaar. Warrant Officer John McNabb, who was not trained as a forward air controller, contacted the F-15s. The orbiting fighter-bombers dropped two 500-pound bombs on



Photos from the top:

Orders group prior to Operation NO LAI for 1st Company, 1 Kandak.

Captain Matt Aggus confers with his Afghan counterpart during a cordon and search operation.

Corporal Tyler Latta on patrol.

Warrant Officer Johnny McNabb and Jack.

Photos courtesy of Tyler Latta & John McNabb

the hut and a 1000-pound bomb on the old clinic. These strikes reduced both structures to six-foot piles of rubble. The M-777s from Sperwan Ghar fired an additional five 155 mm rounds to catch the enemy as they withdrew.

The first platoon from the bazaar then swept south to link up with the second platoon at the old clinic, where they found a lot of casings and some salvage, but no bodies. Low on ammo the decision was made to head back to the strongpoint and call in a casualty evacuation flight. Two Ford Rangers loaded with ammo and led by Sergeant Major Bashir sortied out to the bazaar to act as a reserve as the withdrawal took place. The F-15s remained overhead as long as they could.

ISTAR then reported that the enemy was attempting to hide its dead bodies and assorted body parts in culverts so they could deny the coalition forces a battle damage estimate. These remains were to be retrieved later. The enemy estimated it sustained 15 killed in this action.

As the situation heated up throughout June, a ground resupply operation named ROOM SERVICE was spun up by an armoured combat team from "B" Squadron, The Lord Strathcona's Horse (Royal Canadians) led by Major Chris Adams. This particular "river run" brought in an additional mentor and five more ANA soldiers, just in time for Operation NOLAI. The Mushan force's role in NOLAI was to cross the river with a platoon and two mentors and then distract enemy forces further north right before they were attacked by an infantry company from 2 PPCLI and an infantry company from another Kandak, all supported by the Strathcona's Leopard 2A6M tanks. The Mushan force was ordered to not get decisively engaged.

As the Afghans and Canadians crossed the river bed into Zharey district on the morning of 14 June, an



Photo taken by author



Photo by Cpl David Cribb, CFJIC IS2008-9182



Photo courtesy Latta and McNabb

Top: Operation ROOM SERVICE was the periodic Mushan resupply task executed by the Strathcona's tank squadron and other mechanized forces.

Middle: A newly-acquired Canadian Forces Leopard 2 main battle tank, moves through a forward operating base in Zhari District, Southern Afghanistan, 25 October 2008. The tanks are helping to provide support and protection for the battle group.

1st Company, 1st Kandak and its operational mentoring and liaison team on return to FOB Masu'm Ghar.

Afghan soldier spotted an insurgent with an RPG in a compound. As the platoon took up firing positions, the enemy unleashed a high volume of small arms fire against the coalition forces from a grape field to the west. An OH-58D from The Banshees, already on station, swept up from the river bed, but the communications between the ground forces and the helicopters were not working. Corporal Tyler Latta jumped up onto a wall and pointed in the direction of the enemy so the Banshees could go to work and .50 cal machine gun fire raked the grape field. Then between 8 and 10 insurgents opened up from covered positions to the north in a tree line. The Afghans returned fire that was inaccurate but voluminous. Pumped on adrenalin, the RPG gunners fired too high, arching their rockets to no effect.

One of the other mentors, Corporal Tyler Latta, fired M203 grenade rounds into the northern tree line to mark the target, while ISTAR reports confirmed that a force of between 10 to 15 Taliban were in the area. The OH-58D made multiple gun runs on the tree line until it had expended its ammunition. The snub-nosed rocket pod was employed until it too was out of rockets. This engagement lasted 15 minutes. A Canadian TUAV then spotted an insurgent lugging an 82 mm recoilless rifle heading north. An orbiting MQ-9 Reaper subsequently ended this threat by dropping a 500-pound bomb.

The fire from the tree line dropped off and the Afghans and their mentors moved in, finding seven dead enemy. Then two elders approached, but some of the Afghans believed that they were being used to plant false information or worse trying to suck the platoon into an ambush in the compound complex to the northwest. As the OH-58D was low on fuel, it headed home. Once the helicopter departed, five insurgents opened up with small arms. The decision was

made to move back to the river bed and hold, so a request for fire from the 1 RCHAM-777's at Sperwan Ghar was submitted. This mission could not be executed. With the Afghans running low on ammo, McNabb and Latta decided to use their smoke grenades to cover a withdrawal across the river bed, as an Afghan section sortied out from Mushan to the south bank to assist. However, once the platoon was back at Strongpoint Mushan, three mortar rounds landed right on the southwest edge of the wire. Shrapnel hit an Afghan commander in the shoulder and Captain Hyatt was slightly wounded. The .50 cal and C-6 machine guns in the towers immediately opened up on the point of origin using the "uneducated guess" method. ISTAR reports later estimated that 12 enemy were killed during the course of the day's operations, all on the north bank of the river.

On 15 June, a similar cross-river operation was mounted from Mushan, but this time the entry point was shifted 800 metres west. Starting out at 0300 hours, the probe ran into trouble immediately due to a navigation error which put them 200 metres further west in an area that had virtually no cover when the sun came up at around 0430 hours. ISTAR reports indicated that the enemy "just went nuts" and ordered local forces to observe and engage as rapidly as possible. When this information was relayed to the platoon, the interpreter started to panic and started to urinate every five minutes. Some of the ANA soldiers started to panic too, which put McNabb and Latta in a bind. Knowing that panic is contagious and must be countered immediately, McNabb and Latta decided to have the "C" Troop M-777's drop some smoke to the north of their location. ISTAR reports told the platoon that the enemy was worried about how close the smoke was to their position, so McNabb called in a fire mission

of proximity-fused high explosive rounds in the same area after he saw three enemy moving in that area.

An Afghan soldier then spotted a single insurgent and dispatched him with an RPG round. The fight was on as a five-man insurgent group then opened up on the platoon. Lieutenant Dawa Jan, who had been trying to calm the panicked interpreter, ordered the platoon to move back to the south bank. As they moved across, they saw that the Kutchi camp on the south bank was being packed up and a trail of people were moving to the west. This was not a good sign. An ISTAR asset reported that there were several non-Kutchi present, some wearing black turbans, but they appeared to be unarmed. As the enemy fire resumed from the north bank, Lieutenant Jan prepared to move the platoon east along the river when an Afghan soldier spotted men with weapons on a wall paralleling the river on the south bank. The Sperwan Ghar M-777's fired a linear smoke mission, followed by a high explosive mission onto the wall. The platoon dashed across the river bed to secure the position. The wall, however, was 25 feet high which forced the platoon to continue east once more, which produced a repeat of the situation – the artillery fired smoke but then the enemy opened fire from the north bank. McNabb's helmet was knocked off by an RPG blast, while Latta sought out an extraction route. The guns fired a linear HE mission down the river bank in a bid to stop the fire. The rounds "walked" down the north side of river and had a noticeable effect on the enemy's aim.

As the platoon finally made its way back to the strongpoint, it came under ineffective fire from the bazaar. The guns from Sperwan Ghar now had to shift fire since combat outposts elsewhere along FOSTERS were under attack. An orbiting MQ-1 Predator spotted four insurgents 500



CFJIC LT2005-0526



Photo courtesy Latta & McNabb



Photo courtesy Latta & McNabb



Photo courtesy Latta & McNabb

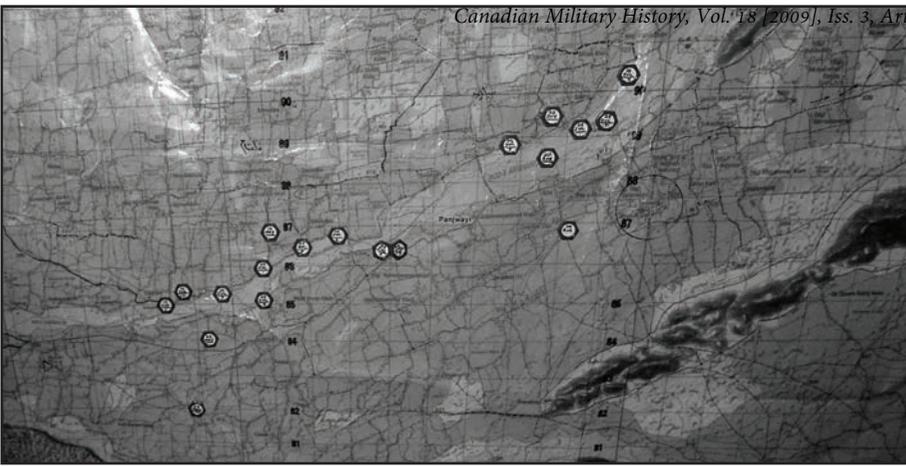
Photos from the top:

A Canadian Sperwer Tactical Unmanned Aerial Vehicle ready for launch.

OMLT 71A at the end of the Mushan operations: MCpl Trevor Saina, WO John McNabb, MCpl Tyler Latta, Capt Matt Aggus, Cpl Craig White.

MCpl Tyler Latta and WO John McNabb at Strongpoint Mushan.

"The guys."



Photos taken by author

Troops In Contact (TICs) – Each pin represents a contact with enemy forces. The top map shows the TICs for the OMLT in Panjwayi District, while the second shows the TICs around Strongpoint Mushan for the same period.

metres away from Mushan preparing to fire RPGs. They were successfully engaged with a Hellfire missile.

Operation NOLAI disrupted enemy harassing fire that was being directed at patrols near the bazaar in addition to the distraction generated to support the 2 PPCLI company operation. The heavy

contacts during Op NOLAI, however, left the company in Mushan low on most supplies. While awaiting resupply, the strongpoint and its occupants were engaged in almost daily gunfights throughout June. The insurgents then mounted a bold attack on 22 June. Machine gun fire raked the strongpoint, while RPG

rockets were fired from the west. The Canadian mentors and the ANA responded with a high volume of direct and indirect fire to ward off the attackers. During the course of the firefight, ISTAR reports indicated that the enemy wanted to generate casualties so that the coalition would respond with a MEDEVAC helicopter, which in turn was to be targeted for destruction. After this engagement, the enemy force in the Mushan area ran short of ammunition which slowed their operations for a time.

The next day, an ANA patrol noted that women and children were evacuating the area west of the bazaar. This was an ominous sign. Twenty-four hours later on 28 June, RPG volleys, small arms and now an 82 mm recoilless rifle poured fire onto the strongpoint. The Canadian mentors dragged out their Carl Gustav and fired back with 84 mm rocket-assisted projectiles. They also bombarded the attackers with the 60 mm mortar and emptied box after box of .50 cal ammunition as the Afghans moved the Ford Rangers into the run-ups and engaged with 12.7mm DshKa's.

On 29 June, a smaller volume of small arms fire was directed at the Mushan force from a pair of grape drying huts to the northwest. The ANA returned fire. The next day what appeared to be a coordinated small arms attack from the northwest and the south west was repelled. The situation quieted down until 4 July when an ANA patrol in the bazaar was shot at and the strongpoint mortared. The insurgents said "goodbye" to 1st Company and the 71A team with a devastating mortar attack which wounded five ANA soldiers, and disabled the 60 mm mortar. One of the wounded suffered a serious brain injury, which was attended to by the Canadian medic, Master Corporal Ian Mothas. Almost all of the medical supplies were used up. The severely wounded Afghan soldier later died.

Mortar Games

The Strathcona's Leopards deployed again on 5 July during Operation ROOM SERVICE 2 and fought their way to Mushan, resulting in multiple engagements along the Arghandab River. 2nd Company and the 71B team took over from 1st Company and 71A, who had deployed into a "bubble" around the strongpoint in order to receive the column. 71B and 2nd Company were greeted with a mortar attack on 9 July, which produced two more Afghan casualties and took out the communications equipment. In this attack, five mortar rounds were fired from the vicinity of the clinic and two hit inside the compound. A subsequent fire destroyed the accommodation tents and most of the strongpoint's stores. The 71B commander, Captain Slade Lerch requested that a Joint Terminal Air Controller (JTAC) and other assets be deployed to Strongpoint Mushan to deal with the mortars.

On the return trip, the 71A team and the ANA company was tucked into the "bubble of steel" provided by the tanks of the Operation ROOM SERVICE column which snaked its way back along the Arghandab River towards Mas'um Ghar forward operating base. 71A's ordeal was not over yet. The column was hit by enemy fire and Captain Matt Aggus dismounted with the Afghans to engage the ambushers as the Strathcona's Leopard 2s returned fire with their 120 mm guns. The enemy fled. The column was hit again 600 metres further along but this time the enemy focused on the ANA's soft-skinned Rangers. The enemy RPG

and small arms fire, coming from both banks of the river, was inaccurate. The ANA stood and fought back as artillery was requested. Sergeant Abdul Haq, seeing an Afghan soldier fire his machine gun in a jerky and ineffective fashion, grabbed the PKM, ran up and fired the weapon, stunning and scattering part of the ambush force. Then, in what has to be the dumbest move in Taliban military history, an insurgent armed with an RPG ran onto the river bed directly in front of a Leopard 2 and tried to engage the tank. Two tank commanders apparently argued over who was going to take him out, so both fired simultaneously and vapourized the insurgent with 120 mm HEAT rounds before he could fire his rocket launcher.

Meanwhile, back at Strongpoint Mushan, Afghan National Army patrols were engaged from Zharey district any time they went near the bazaar and the indirect fire attacks continued. From 7 to 26 July, Strongpoint Mushan and its occupants, now augmented to include seven Canadian mentors, were engaged on 14 separate occasions with various combinations of small arms fire, RPG attacks, and mortar fire. In one of these engagements, the strongpoint took several mortar rounds, one of which landed two

metres from the mortar pit and its ammo stash. Captain Lerch, using his binoculars from one of the towers and covered by Corporal Duarte with a .50 cal machine gun, called down corrections to Master Warrant Officer Rod Dearing and Corporal MacDonald, who were manning the 60 mm mortar. Corporal John Prior fired the 25 mm from a LAV-III with Master Corporal Todd Woods in the other tower spotting. The next day the insurgents held a funeral for their mortar expert and credited the "government mortar team" with the kill. Several Afghan soldiers received wounds and were medevaced by UH-60s covered by Banshee OH-58Ds. The Afghans and the mentors maintained their rigorous patrol schedule in the surrounding area.

Operation LEWE, a sweep by "B" Company 2 PPCLI, was put together to disrupt enemy activity and give the strongpoint some breathing room. Fighting patrols from 1st Company and 71A, Weapons Company and 71D, and "B" Company fanned out west of Mushan, which resulted in several TICs but no mortars.

At the end of July, 2nd Company and the 71B team returned to Mushan on Operation ROOM SERVICE 3, and Captain Aggus, Master Corporal Saina and Corporal Latta returned. While the RIP and resupply was

Photo by MCpl Karl McKay, CFJIC AR2008-K074-024



An Afghan soldier has decorated his RPG with flowers while he patrols through a marijuana field in the Panjwayi district, August 2008.



A British RAF Chinook fires CHAFF against a detected threat before touching down at a 3 RCR battlegroup forward operating base, 22 October 2008.

the mortar base plate, and sight in the weapon. Other insurgents, obviously more expendable than “the specialist,” were used to fire and reload the weapon while the specialist left the mortar position long before the counter-battery fire arrived. As the counter-battery fire improved and patrol programme expanded the security “bubble,” the enemy mortar specialist and his apprentices were forced to move north of the Arghandab River.

Relief In Place

After its successful participation in another incursion into Zharey district, 1/1-205 Kandak and its mentors were extracted from Mushan and rotated back to Camp Hero for refitting, training, and rest by September 2008. Canadian engineers deployed to the FOB Mushan and laid “Rhino Snot” and Moby Matting to improve the helipad. Canadian CH-47 Chinook helicopters escorted by CH-146 Griffons took over resupply and RIP missions. A company from 2/2-205 “Strike” Kandak moved into the FOB. Families started to move back into the area at this time. Captain Sahim Ravatullah personally guaranteed that he and his men would provide security to the area during a shura held with the local elders. Constant framework patrols demonstrated his resolve over a two-week “honeymoon” period.

By the end of October 2008, relations between the local population and the new ANA company were improving. The Taliban, noting that the bazaar was the nexus of this improved relationship, established a rival market three kilometres west

in progress, the enemy was bold enough to engage the tank leaguer with seven rounds of ineffective mortar fire the first night. When they tried it again the following night, the mortar was engaged with two 500-pound bombs from a pair of US Marine Corps F-18s, while insurgents manoeuvring to engage on the ground were discouraged from doing so by 120 mm gun fire from the Leopard 2 tanks. An estimated five insurgents were killed.

Once ensconced in the strongpoint and the tanks had gone home with the 71A team, the new occupants were subjected to a coordinated small arms direct fire and a mortar attack, which resulted in two mortar hits inside the compound and three casualties. On 26 July, 71B and an ANA patrol were engaged by a section of insurgents. Patience had worn thin and “C” Troop’s M-777’s from Sperwan Ghar were called into action to deal with the ambush. As if in retaliation, five mortar rounds were fired at the strongpoint the next day, but this grouping was not as accurate as previous attacks. None of the rounds landed anywhere near the compound. This attack was replicated the following day, leading some to speculate that a new mortar team was now in play. Patrols found numerous

duds in the ground around the strongpoint and the ammunition was determined to be of Iranian origin.

The enemy now resorted to a new tactic. A delegation of people arrived at the Joint District Coordination Centre in Panjwayi town, and asked for a shura, which was granted. They petitioned the government to have the strongpoint and its forces removed. They asserted that crops and compounds were damaged by the various resupply operations and they demanded restitution for the damage. The problem was that this delegation did not in fact represent the people of Mushan at all and the Afghans identified one man as a relative of a known Taliban fighter.

When this approach did not work, small arms attacks on the strongpoint resumed on 14 August, followed by two more mortar attacks on 20 August. This time, an ISTAR system was able to identify the point of origin of the mortar attacks and the M-777’s from Sperwan Ghar blanketed the position with 155 mm rounds in an effort to kill the mortar teams. What emerged later was that an enemy mortar specialist was brought in to replace the one killed in a previous engagement. This individual’s modus operandi was different. He would establish

of Mushan town with checkpoints to protect it and used intimidation patrols to demand that the locals close the existing bazaar near the FOB. Attendance at the regular bazaar dropped 75 percent over the course of one week but the ANA and the OMLT responded by pushing out west of the town. The Taliban's response was to resume harassing mortar fire directed against FOB Mushan in late November and even brought in one of their scarce 82 mm recoilless rifles. On 17 November three first round hits eventually landed inside the FOB, killing two and wounding four Afghan soldiers, while other mortars were fired towards Zangabad and IEDs were laid on the road to the east in order to discourage reinforcement. Unlike the previous locations, the new mortars were emplaced by their teams inside houses and fired through holes cut in the roof. Clearly, any aerial retaliation which resulted in destroyed buildings and dead civilian "human shields" would be exploited by the enemy and condemned by the Western media. ISTAR reports confirmed that this was another professional team that had infiltrated from Pakistan. As US Army UH-60s conducted the MEDEVAC, Canadian M-777s and a British 81 mm mortar team from 42 Commando worked with the OMLT and the ANA to suppress the new enemy teams as best they could given the new circumstances.

"M" Company, 3 RCR eventually surged into the area and captured three mortar tubes. One was still warm after being fired. After these operations, the bazaar near the FOB re-opened. In January 2009 the local merchants told the ANA that they were not getting the same amount of business in the "Taliban bazaar" and preferred the previous arrangements where they could make real money.

End Game

Strongpoint Mushan was clearly a disruptive element to the enemy programme for Panjwayi and Zharey districts as evidenced by the significant resources, varied and escalatory methods, and scarce expertise the insurgents employed in their attempts to remove the coalition presence. The willingness of the Afghan soldiers to continuously exert a presence in the area, even if it was limited at times to a three-kilometer security "bubble," demonstrated to the population that the government was there to stay, even while under heavy contact over several days. The question of how to expand that bubble so that governance and development activities could expand was not addressed during that time, given the security situation. In the Afghan cultural context of the war, the sort of obstinacy projected by the defenders of Strongpoint Mushan can have a positive effect on the population – if the message is conveyed properly by both the defenders themselves with a PSYOPS team, with CIMIC quick impact projects, and by the provincial and national governments via their methods. Sadly, this level of coordination does not yet exist within the Afghan National Army structure and they remain dependent on the coalition forces for such support. As of February 2009, Strongpoint Mushan continues to hold and provide a security presence to the people at the western end of Panjwayi district.

Notes

1. A note on sources: The author was present in the spring and summer of 2008 for the Route Fosters "duel" and observed it from several levels. During a research trip to the forward-deployed

elements of the OMLT in the summer of 2008 I interviewed the personnel involved in the Mushan operations as they rotated out of the position. I would especially like to thank Lieutenant-Colonel Dan Drew, Major Dave Proctor, Master Warrant Officer Rod Dearing, and Warrant Officer Chuck Cote for their insights into OMLT operations at this time. I would also like to thank Corporal Tyler Latta, Warrant Officer John McNabb, and Captain Matt Aggus for sharing their experiences with me. I also was briefed by the army aviators from "Company "B," 2-17 Cavalry on their role supporting Canadian and Afghan forces in Panjwayi district. I would also like to thank Lieutenant Candice Dunn and "C" Troop, "B" Battery 1 RCHA. Major Steve Nolan, Captain Sean French, and Warrant Officer Joe Doucette from the follow-on OMLT rotation, assisted me with the events of late 2008. Note that certain control measures and intelligence collection assets have been blurred in this narrative for operational security considerations. Some names have been altered to avoid personal embarrassment.

2. The Canadian soldiers from 71A asked me to note that they do not view their actions at Mushan as extraordinary in the context of what other elements of the OMLT were engaged in at the time in Zharey and Panjwayi districts throughout 2008 and wanted to convey that this is but one action in the course of their tour in Afghanistan. They took pains to express to me their concerns about being labelled "self-aggrandizing" by others because their actions appeared in print and other actions did not. The full story of the OMLT and its other operations during that time will be told in a future narrative so that all OMLT elements receive equal historical recognition for their efforts.
3. The Kutchi are nomadic and can be found throughout Afghanistan. They tend to live in domed tents and keep camel, sheep, and donkey herds in addition to various agrarian pursuits.
4. At least from this particular rotation.
5. Those who observed this attack remain psychologically scarred by it.

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