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Incursion at Howz-e Madad: An Afghanistan Vignette

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Incursion at Howz-e Madad

An Afghanistan Vignette

Sean M. Maloney

On 20 June 2007, Canadian and Afghan National Army forces supported by Dutch and American air forces conducted one of a series of incursions into the Zharey District west of Kandahar City. This incursion, called Operation SEASONS, was representative of operations undertaken in the summer of 2007 by the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) in this area and is an evolution from how Canadian ground forces have been employed since they were re-introduced to the region in 2005. This account is based on the personal experiences of the author who observed these combat operations while they were in progress.¹

The Terrain

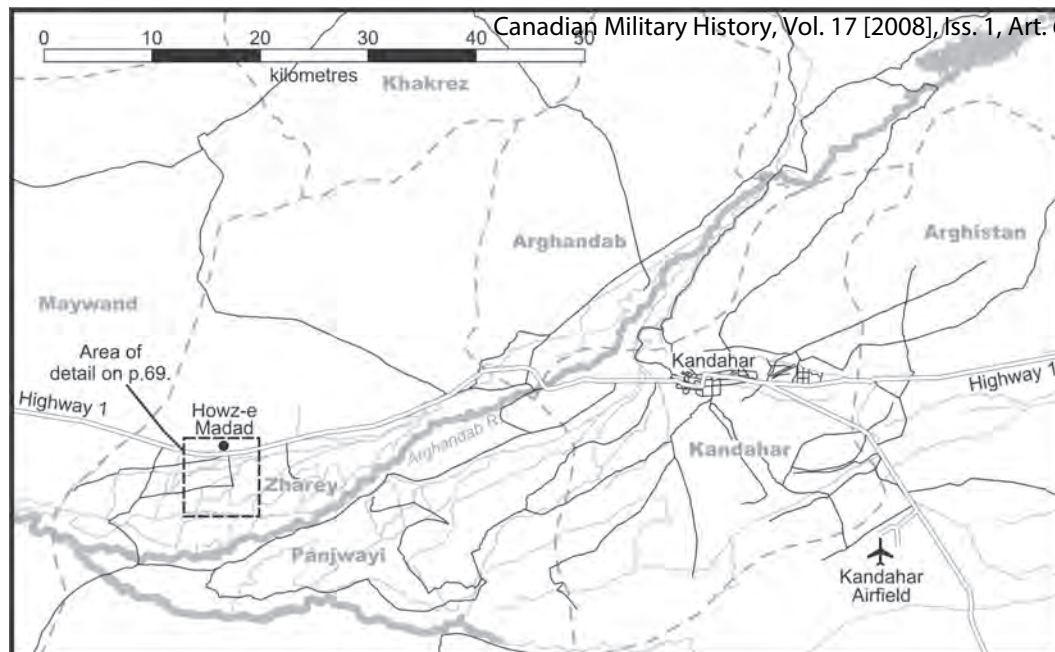
It has become a media cliché to use the phrase “the volatile Zharey District,” but it is fairly accurate. Zharey District occupies what amounts to a triangle of well-cultivated land north of the Arghandab river, west of Kandahar City. The top of the triangle parallels Highway 1, the main and only paved east-west highway between Kandahar City, Helmand province, and then to Herat. Highway 1 meets Highway 4 east of Kandahar City, which in turn

links the entire southern part of Afghanistan with Spinboldak and then to Quetta in Pakistan. Insurgent forces occupying Zharey can theoretically interfere with commerce on Highway 1 which can have detrimental economic effects on the region, not just the province.

South of Highway 1 can only be described in military terms as complex terrain. Though Zharey District is fairly small compared to other provincial districts, it consists of a dense-packed array of grape-growing ditches, walled compounds, walled fields, irrigation streams covered with foliage, and narrow tracks. Grape drying huts, in the middle of the trench-like rows of grape ditches, are made of mud that has dried into concrete which effectively turns them into ready-made bunkers with firing ports.

South of the Arghandab River lies Panjwayi District which for the most part resembles Zharey District in terms of complex terrain. A steep hill line separates most of Panjwayi from the Arghandab River: the combination of the two presents a significant obstacle and discourages north-south traffic with two exceptions: there are fords at Bazaar-e Panjwayi, a significant town and market place; and another to the west. The terrain north of Highway 1 and to the west of Zharey is open and arid. The Reg Desert lies to the south and south west of Panjwayi District.

What of the human terrain? Zharey District is the product of a redistricting process conducted



Map drawn by Mike Bechthold ©2008

in 2003 designed to rationalize the physical conformation of the land to provincial district administration. Consequently, Zharey was carved out of several other districts: Panjwayi, Arghandab, and Maywand. The tribal overlay, of course, does not conform to the artificial administrative overlay. Zharey District is completely dominated by Pashtuns, though they come from both Pashtun Confederations: the Durrani and Ghilzai which have competed for dominance of the area for centuries. At least six tribal groups are present in Zharey District.

Canada's involvement with Zharey District dates from 2005-06 when the Canadian-led Provincial Reconstruction Team (PRT) working with the US 173rd Airborne Brigade attempted to assess the area for aid and reconstruction purposes. At that time American forces were attacked along Highway 1 on a regular basis by small numbers of Taliban forces operating from Zharey. Task Force BAYONET, which was understrength, focused on the Shah Wali Kot district of Kandahar Province and did not have the resources to deal with Zharey. At this time, most of the action was in Oruzgan Province north of Kandahar and Zabol Province to the northeast. The Shah Wali Kot district operations were supporting this effort. In effect, Zharey was a no-go area for the PRT, which instead focused its efforts on Panjwayi District and elsewhere. These contacts led to better information on activities in Zharey and when the Canadians took over Regional Command South (RC South) in January-February 2006, there was increased interest in the district.

Throughout the spring of 2006, it was more and more apparent that the Quetta Shura, the council leading the anti-Afghanistan and anti-coalition effort out of Pakistan, had shifted its operational approach to RC South. A steady increase in infiltration of both personnel and weapons was detected and by the summer several pre-emptive actions were conducted by Task Force ORION, the

Canadian battlegroup based on 1st Battalion, Princess Patricia's Canadian Light Infantry (1 PPCLI). One of these operations was the first full battalion-sized combat operation since Korea. The enemy was forced to either reinforce Zharey or pull out and leave a small presence. The Quetta Shura decided to make a stand and massively re-infiltrated Zharey in August 2006. This led to Operation MEDUSA, a Canadian-led, brigade-sized multinational operation that inflicted significant damage on the enemy forces in Zharey and Panjwayi districts. There were, however, not enough resources to garrison Zharey with Afghan police or paramilitary forces.

The follow-on operation, BAAZ TSUKA, was mounted in December 2006. This was a Dutch-led multinational operation (RC South had changed from Canadian to Dutch command) designed in part to sweep through Zharey once again and then leave an Afghan security force presence behind to facilitate development and aid activities. For the most part, enemy forces melted away in the face of the ISAF onslaught and reverted to pre-2006 tactics. Again, there were simply not enough police or paramilitary forces to exert control over the entire district and the development effort stalled in the western parts of the district. The decision was made to focus the police and aid effort on the quieter Panjwayi District and to contain Zharey as much as possible.

This effort was called Operation BAAZ TSUKA Phase III. NATO ISAF forces established an enduring presence in the area in the form of several

Far right: Lieutenant-Colonel Rob Walker, commanding officer of the Canadian battlegroup.

Right: Major David Quick, officer commanding India Company, 2 RCR.

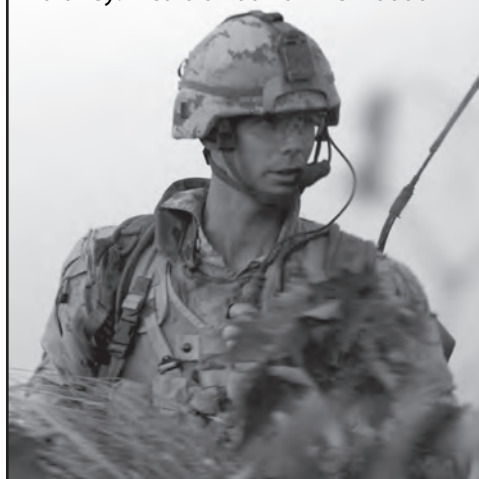
firebases to supplement existing ones. Forward Operating Base Masum Ghar (called FOB MSG by the troops) was constructed on the hills south of the river overlooking Zharey District.

To the north along Highway 1 was Patrol Base Wilson (PBW) which had been established by TF ORION the previous year to assist with route control activities in order to facilitate the British deployment to Helmand Province. Other ISAF forces operated from Maywand district west of Zharey along Highway 1.

The Plan

In the spring of 2007, the Canadian battlegroup, based on 2nd Battalion, The Royal Canadian Regiment (2 RCR), deployed to Zharey and Panjwayi districts. India Company, 2 RCR and "A" Squadron, The Lord Strathcona's Horse (LdSH (RC)) based out of MSG, while "C" Company, 3 PPCLI and a detachment of M-777 guns from "D" Battery, 2nd Regiment, Royal Canadian Horse Artillery (2 RCHA) operated from the Sperwan Ghar (SWG) FOB located in Panjwayi. At this time, the Canadian Operational Mentoring and Liaison Team (OMLT), led by Lieutenant-Colonel (LCol) Ken Eyre, worked closely with elements from the Afghan National Army 205 Corps that were based out of MSG. LCol Rob Walker, the Commanding Officer of the battlegroup, knew that neither he nor the Afghan security forces had the resources to occupy Zharey and that those forces would not be available in the near future: there were barely enough to handle the vital parts of Panjwayi. Working with Major David Quick, officer commanding (OC) India Company, the battlegroup developed a concept of operations designed to keep enemy forces off-balance in Zharey, in effect to deny them the ability to re-build infrastructure that could serve as a mounting base later; to prevent any substantial build up of conventional or near conventional forces along the lines of what occurred in 2006; and to reduce the enemy's ability to interfere with commerce and ISAF resupply traffic on Highway 1.

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The everlasting issue of what constituted enemy activity in the district caused some problems. When Canadian forces built a combat road (Route SUMMIT) from Bazaar-e Panjwayi to Highway 1, there were unintended consequences. The construction of this road diverted water in the east end of Zharey. Age-old and intricate tribal agreements over water use were now disrupted. Certain communities now had the potential upper hand over others and resentments built up bordering on violence. A Canadian solution was to put in culverts to restore the water use patterns – but the culverts made ideal locations for IED (improvised explosive device) attack against forces using Route SUMMIT. When culverts were blown up, was this Taliban activity or not? If one community resorted to AK-47 use over a diverted stream, was this Taliban action? What if Canadian troops were caught in the crossfire? Or, what if Afghan police from one area were conducting activities on behalf of someone else for pay because they had not received monies from their own chain of command for months? These factors complicated any Canadian response to activity in Zharey District. That said, there were organized Taliban teams and sub-units operating in the area in significant but not overwhelming numbers. Their intent was to resuscitate the severely damaged Taliban structure in the district.

Indeed, the use of intelligence-driven operations placed a premium on the need for multiple information sources that could be rapidly cross-checked. Such operations demanded substantial understanding of personalities, Afghan tribal culture, local grievances, historical relationships and how all of this had evolved over the past 20 years. In all cases, the battlegroup and company commanders would have to operate with incomplete information and rely to a certain extent on their hard-won experience with Zharey

District, something not easily transferable in any handover between units. Gut instinct became as important, possibly even more important, than any super-secret SIGINT intercept scooped up from something orbiting in space.

In effect, the battlegroup did not have a singular, linear plan like Operations MEDUSA or BAAZ TSUKA. The overall plan was to mount a series of short-term sorties into Zharey as targets presented themselves, or to conduct sorties to flush-out enemy in a particular area to force them to react into flight or fight mode. This approach meant that the limited number of ISAF and ANA forces did not need to garrison Zharey. It was denial, not occupation, that was key. Randomness was crucial. There was to be no pattern to coalition operations and the maximal use of night cover and deception operations was critical, given that the enemy had significant observation assets, knew exactly what the battlegroup consisted of and what it was capable of doing. MSG is a fairly exposed FOB on the side of a hill and an enemy scout with binoculars in Zharey does not have to leave home to see what is there.

A previous India Company operation had rattled enemy leadership in Zharey. Information came into battlegroup HQ that some 50 enemy fighters had narrowly avoided this previous

sweep operation and were moving to link up with another cell, which was estimated to have 30 fighters. These forces were equipped with AK-47 and PKM automatic weapons, rocket-propelled grenades (RPGs), and 82 mm recoilless rifles. A dead enemy commander, killed during a parallel operation involving coalition special operations forces (SOF) was about to be replaced and the new leader was on his way. They would all be in the vicinity of the Howz-e Madad bazaar and compound complex. The planning cycle for Operation SEASONS had begun.

The geographical position of Howz-e Madad explains why this cluster of dun-coloured compounds is important. As Highway 1 traverses Zharey from east to west, it curves off from the Zharey green belt and heads northwest to Maywand District. The point where it curves off is the point where Zharey's green belt ends and arid open terrain starts. It is the last opportunity for insurgent forces to attack traffic on Highway 1 and retreat into the complex terrain of the green belt. Ambushes west of the green belt are potentially suicidal. There is nowhere to run and a 25 mm round from a LAV-III (light armoured vehicle) or a 30 mm round from an AH-64 Apache helicopter gunship is faster in any event. Ambush operations conducted from the west end of Zharey have a better chance of success to

The LAV-III infantry combat vehicle is the standard vehicle for 2 RCR in Afghanistan. The narrow hull allows it to penetrate constrained areas of Zharey District that would otherwise remain impassable. Its 25mm gun is devastating against enemy in the open or in positions.



Photo by author

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On-call artillery employed during the Howz-e Madad action included one M-177 155 mm gun firing from a FOB in Panjwayi District. The M-777 is highly-accurate and is airortable when slung under CH-47 Chinook helicopters.

those conducted from the east end. At the east end, Zharey tapers into a point and there is less depth to retreat into before hitting the river and the hill line.

In addition, enemy infiltration routes and “rat lines” come into Zharey from west and south west, from Helmand Province. Enemy personnel usually rest in the western part of the district after their long journey before deploying to sites east. In addition larger weapons caches are broken down and then dispersed east. When truck traffic is used by the enemy, Howz-e Madad is the first stop along Highway 1, making it a convenient location. The police in the area are unreliable as the Taliban pays them more money with greater frequency than the government.

The scheme of maneuver that Major Quick, LCol Walker and LCol Shereen Shah agreed on was to move India Company by LAV-III to a drop off point and conduct a night march into a blocking position south of Howz-e Madad. The LAV's were to continue along the highway to draw enemy eyes away. Then two troops of the Strathconas' Leopard C-2 tanks (callsign T-1A) led by Captain Craig Volstead accompanied by an Afghan infantry company from 2-1-205 Kandak

(with the OMLT attached) mounted in armed pickup trucks, and the battlegroup command post (callsign 9er Tac) would then sortie from MSG, move along Highway 1 and then swing south to catch the enemy, like a hammer striking an anvil.

The Action

At 0337 hours on 20 June, there was a slight delay in the departure of the tank-Afghan infantry force when a key member of the command post severely cut himself by accident. This was just as well as not all of the ISTAR resources² were in place: it took the Tactical Unmanned Aerial Vehicle (or TUAV - the Canadian Sperwer system) nicknamed SKIDOO (so-named because the machine has a Bombardier Skidoo engine), time to fly from its base to Zharey. At 0353 hours, LCol Walker took the lead with his LAV-III and the force moved out along Route SUMMIT. India Company had already deployed and was in position. At 0430 9er Tac, accompanied by an artillery forward observation officer/forward air controller (FOO/FAC) LAV-III and a security element moved into a position north of Highway 1 opposite Howz-e Madad. The area was carefully

The Leopard C-2 medium tank is employed by “A” Squadron LdSH (RC) in operations in Zharey District. The Leopard C-2 shown here is equipped with a mine plow not unlike those developed during the Second World War.



Left: This is an aerial photo of a typical compound complex in Zharey District. Note the walled fields and tree-covered irrigation streams.

Below: Grape growing trenches like this blanket the terrain in Zharey District. Note the grape drying huts irregularly spaced throughout the fields.

Photos by author

checked for mines and IEDs on arrival. The first contact with the enemy was at 0435 hours, just at dawn. Red tracer fire arced across the sky from west to east and a forward air controller immediately called for air support. The two on-call USAF A-10 Warthogs were now on the way.

The battle area requires some description. In effect, there were several compound complexes (see map on next page) and a wadi system, all surrounded by grape trenches. Each walled compound and its associated outbuildings formed natural defensive positions and usually held several extended families. In this case, the enemy had temporarily depopulated part of the area. The complexes were connected by narrow roads and tracks, most of them lined with high mud walls on either side.

India Company deployed to its blocking position called Objective RED without incident during the night. When the Leopard/Afghan National Army “hammer” came down south

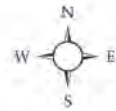
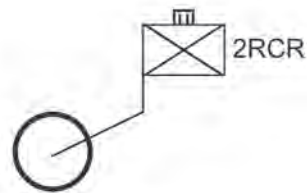
from Highway 1 to meet the “anvil” (Objective RED), there was no contact. Then the enemy started firing from Objective BLUE at the forces moving around Objective RED. But BLUE was southeast of RED, not north. India Company engaged BLUE but the enemy then opened up from BLACK, to the south of RED. And then from another location to the west, a single shooter wounded an ANA soldier from some distance. A “nine liner” MEDEVAC request went out and a US Army UH-60 Blackhawk was dispatched to collect the wounded. A variety of ISTAR assets were now orbiting the battle and the information was continuously fed to LCol Walker. Intelligence revealed a pickup truck with an enemy RPG team moving in from the west. A fire mission was called in to suppress the shooter and the RPG team. At this point there was a detachment of Canadian M-777 155 mm guns at another fire base, commanded by Lieutenant Eric Ross. Only one gun was operational, however, but the volume of fire made it look as if a half-battery was in action.

The Afghan company and OMLT started to conduct a detailed search of several compounds while the Leopard tanks moved to form a cordon. At this point, 0506 hours, a Canadian soldier

Opposite: Afghan National Army soldiers set up behind a wall during a dawn skirmish with the Taliban.

Incursion at Howz-e Madad 20 June 2007

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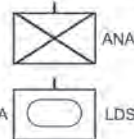


Objective
Yellow

Objective
Red

Objective
Green

Objective
Black



Objective
Blue



Area strafed by A-10s and F-16s

Enemy
movement

Enemy
movement

Enemy
movement

2RCR - 2nd Battalion The Royal Canadian Regiment
LDSH - The Lord Strathcona's Horse (Royal Canadians)
ANA - Afghan National Army

Map drawn by Mike Bechthold ©2008

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Above: A US Army UH-60 Blackhawk MEDEVAC stands off while the dust generated by an artillery strike abates. It will then fly in and extract coalition casualties.

Left: A close-up of the American MEDEVAC helicopter as it lands to evacuate the wounded Afghan National Army soldiers.

was wounded and moved to a casualty collection point. India Company held Objective RED, the tanks were observing to the west, and the plan was now to move a platoon from India Company to Objective GREEN. ISTAR resources then detected what they suspected was a significant dismounted enemy force south of Objective BLACK. As the platoon was breaking contact from RED to move to GREEN, another Canadian was wounded.

The FOO/FAC co-located with India Company, callsign G 12, was engaged with RPG and small arms fire and saw the enemy was reinforcing from the southwest. The question for LCol Walker was this: was the enemy bringing in forces to cover an extraction of their engaged forces, or was the enemy reinforcing the fight? ISTAR resources were tasked to find out and were directed further south. India Company at this time was engaged by 14 enemy personnel equipped with RPGs firing from positions directly south of BLACK and it looked like a pickup truck was moving in from the west to assist them. An A-10 was brought in to engage and it opened up with its GAU-8 30mm gun on these enemy forces.

The situation as it stood at 0517 hours had a Canadian platoon with the Leopards on Objective GREEN preparing to move to Objective BLACK; a Canadian platoon on Objective RED, with the ANA company consolidating compounds behind the Canadian screen. Suddenly, 15 enemy were engaged northeast of GREEN. LCol Walker instructed the force to assume an all-round defensive posture, consolidate the interior of the "goose egg" and prepare to meet several attacks. The ANA company was to move to BLACK and sweep it east to west.

Three close air support missions were flown by USAF A-10s and the Dutch F-16s that showed up to replace them to the south of BLACK to suppress enemy fire. The three coalition wounded were by this time in an armoured TLAV ambulance (a modified and completely re-built M-113 APC) and were moving to a helicopter landing site for evacuation by the UH-60 Blackhawk. Significantly, the UH-60 came in alone without its usual AH-64 Apache escort. There were simply not enough AH's available that morning with other coalition operations ongoing elsewhere.

Enemy survivors from the A-10 and F-16 sorties tried to break contact and headed west. At the same time, five enemy with RPGs moved north to replace them and fired at Canadians in the vicinity of BLACK. Then enemy in a grape drying hut southeast of BLACK opened up with small arms. The TUAV also located three “squirters,” survivors of the A-10 strafing, hiding in a tree line. G 12, the artillery FOO/FAC, tried to acquire them when the TUAV then picked up what looked like 50 persons moving to the west of the battle. When queried, the operators noted that none appeared to be carrying weapons. Callsign 66B, a sniper detachment, then engaged enemy targets occupying rooftops to the west. Were the 50 people reinforcements? Were they civilians fleeing? Snipers observed individuals that were not part of the group equipped with RPGs and they looked like they were a separate entity. But nobody could be sure. Major Quick instructed that no action be taken until a positive identification could be made.

In effect, the combined Canadian-Afghan force was in a hedgehog posture at 0550 hours. LCol Walker’s intention was to let the enemy come to him and then kill them. It appeared as though there were enemy standing and fighting in small groups all around the hedgehog, some enemy were withdrawing, and at the same time it appeared as though there were two large groups of enemy approaching from the south and south west. At 0610 hours, the wounded were flown out by helicopter.

The snipers require some mention. Sniper information flowed into the command post like

TUAV information and was a notable proportion of the information picture. At the same time, 66B snipers killed an enemy RPG team with shots at ranges of 700 metres.

At this time, the ANA encountered some insurgents hiding in the Objective BLACK compounds and set about clearing them. Searches continued for information as much as insurgents. LCol Walker took stock of the situation at 0605 hours. The enemy was taken by surprise by the incursion. ISTAR information indicated this as did their behavior on the ground. It appeared as though the 50 persons to the west were civilians and not reinforcements, through there were still enemy present to the west in small numbers firing sporadically. The TUAV then spotted organized enemy on Objective YELLOW to the west. The Leopards traversed and opened fire. The situation at BLACK was, however, confused. As the Afghan company cleared the site, an RPG opened up on them from behind, i.e. to the north, which wounded two Afghan soldiers. A Leopard was brought in and the RPG team was killed with main armament fire.

The enemy again attempted to introduce two-man RPG teams into the interior of the hedgehog using grape trenches and wadi systems. There also appeared to be more enemy hiding in Objective BLACK. The Afghan company engaged in close combat in the compounds to ensure once and for all they were cleared. Then the TUAV operators reported that the enemy was hiding RPG teams among the civilian population moving south of BLACK. LCol Walker concluded that were using the civilians as shields and held fire.

Canadian commanders received crucial information during the battle from ISTAR resources, such as the Tactical Unmanned Aerial Vehicle (or TUAV - also known as the Canadian Sperwer system). Here, a Sperwer is launched from its base at Kandahar Airfield.



The Afghan company then struck gold. As they moved slightly east of BLACK, they uncovered a cache. They were immediately engaged, but were covered by Leopard HESH rounds and coaxial machinegun fire as they exploited this site.

New information arrived in the command post. The enemy was trying to introduce 82 mm recoilless rifle teams into the battle. Their intent was most likely to engage and kill a Canadian Leopard or other armoured vehicle. This would have significant spin-off effects. It would be a morale victory for enemy forces showing that tanks could be engaged and destroyed. It would have an impact in the Canadian media and tie up Canada's military leadership who would be

forced to explain to the vociferous critics why they deployed tanks to Afghanistan in the first place and why Canada needed tanks at all. Instructions were therefore issued to give priority to the destruction of anything resembling an 82 mm recoilless rifle team.

As another UH-60 arrived to evacuate the wounded around 0644 hours, the battle entered a lull. It was already getting stiflingly hot and in a matter of hours it would reach the point where Leopard crews in their un-air conditioned vehicles would be increasingly incapacitated. The crews joked that IV solution bags should be hung on the turret ceilings for re-hydration purposes.



Below: Artillery strike goes in at Howz-e Madad as seen from the battlegroup command post vehicle.

Left: A group of Canadian Forces and Afghan National Army soldiers prepare to return fire during a dawn skirmish with the Taliban.



A Canadian platoon and combat engineers from 42 Field Squadron consolidated Objective BLACK. There they found Taliban graffiti and weapons all over the complex. Sensitive Site Exploitation (SSE) and Battle Damage Assessment (BDA) activities commenced on several locations. SSEs are designed to produce intelligence on enemy structures, operations and intentions, while BDA is designed to assist in improving operational effectiveness. The engineers uncovered a significant cache at BLACK. Initial reports were that there were RPGs, artillery shells, and a variety of other explosives stockpiled there. The assessments continued when more reports came in that there was significant civilian movement to the west and southwest. At this point LCol Walker and Major Quick were considering a move onto Objective YELLOW to clean it out. Then at 0703 hours a Canadian platoon and its accompanying Leopards were engaged with small arms fire. Simultaneously, back north of Highway 1 the battlegroup command post LAV III suddenly traversed its turret onto a white car that was moving at speed towards 9er Tac. The car was dissuaded from coming closer and sped off in the direction it came from. There is no classic "rear area" and all coalition forces must be capable of defending themselves at all times no matter what activity they are engaged in. There were a series of explosions to the west, which sounded like RPGs but remain unexplained as there was no damage to friendly forces. It is possible poor enemy ammunition handling resulted in the detonation of reinforcement stocks.

After 0700 hours, the enemy renewed his activities to the southeast of BLACK. There were three groupings of Taliban firing onto BLACK but they were using cover: buildings, walls, grape trenches which all made target identification difficult for the Leopards and the platoon on BLACK. The Leopards used coaxial machine gun fire to suppress enemy fire while the infantry picked out individual insurgents and killed them with aimed shots. Fire resumed against BLACK

Top: Sergeant Brian Durelle, India Company, 2 RCR, takes a breather while a Leopard tank stands watch.

Centre: A group of Canadian and Afghan National Army soldiers prepare to move against the Taliban.

Bottom: A group of Afghan National Army talk tactics following the action at Howz-e Madad.



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Top: Canadian Forces Medical Technicians Corporal Sonja Briere (foreground) and Corporal Vay Tu care for an Afghan National Army soldier wounded during operations on 20 June 2007.

Centre & Bottom: Canadian Forces Combat Engineers carry the wounded Afghan soldier to a waiting armoured TLAV ambulance



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from the south as well, which brought with it an A-10 strafing run (the terrain south of BLACK is much more open and conducive to this type of air support). The two A-10s rolled in, popped flares, and fired extended bursts of its 30 mm gun, which sounds like heaven being ripped open.

Elements of the Afghan company in positions northwest of BLACK started taking sporadic fire and a Badger armoured engineer vehicle was moved in to breach a high wall so that the Afghans could deal with this threat. There was another lull that lasted until 0726 hours. Another SSE, this one conducted by the Afghans, discovered a Taliban command post which had significant information in it. Then enemy ammunition cached in a grape drying hut exploded without warning and everyone took cover. Other SSE activities uncovered RPG launchers and RPG rounds. Most important, a stock of artillery rounds that were in the process of being converted to IEDs was discovered, as were IED detonators and other critical components necessary for their manufacture. BLACK, it turned out, was the base of a Taliban IED cell and it afforded insight into current IED techniques and procedures. A large amount of ammunition was found throughout the battle area.

ISTAR resources then detected 30 enemy moving west on a route south of the battle area – they appeared to be fleeing. At 0745 hours the Provincial Operations Centre reported that an IED attack in Panjwayi District to the south had killed two people – it was not clear whether they were coalition forces, civilians, or police. One interpretation was that it was designed to draw attention away from the Howz-e Madad battle.

The next contact was at 0750 hours. Four Taliban equipped with an RPG and PKM machine gun were running away from the battle area. Inexplicably, two pickup trucks with four Taliban equipped with anti-tank weapons and then a motorcycle team approached the battle area from

Top: An US Air Force A-10 Thunderbolt II ground attack aircraft performs a low-level strafing run firing its 30 mm cannon. Aircraft like these provided close air support to Canadian and Afghan forces during the fighting at Howz-e Madad.

US Air Force photo



Centre: Private Glynn Doucette of India Company, 2 RCR, indicates how well things are going as he and his section members set up an all-round defence.

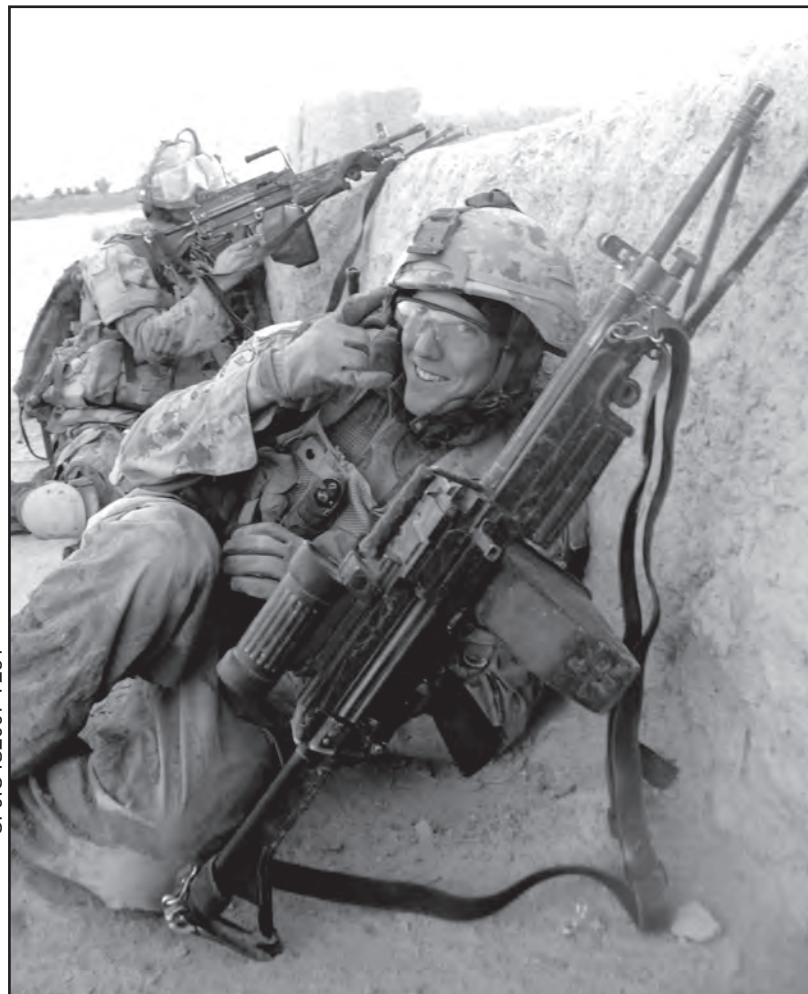
Bottom: Badger armoured engineering vehicles are used for hasty road repairs and for breaching operations in close terrain. In this case, the damage caused by a culvert IED on Route SUMMIT had to be dealt with.

southeast of Objective BLACK. A Leopard opened fire with HESH and coaxial machine gun fire and took them out at a range of 200 metres.

These two Leopards slowly advanced south of BLACK when they were engaged by enemy anti-tank weapons. One of Leopards, equipped with a plough, took the hit on the device but the vehicle remained operational. As this position was slightly south of the limit of exploitation established for the operation, they were ordered back to BLACK.

More information came in about the IED strike in Panjwayi District. It turned out that a Canadian vehicle was hit, but the situation was developing. While 9er Tac was dealing with this new incident, an A-10 on a strafing run fired on the road next to an Afghan platoon narrowly missing them. This resulted in a temporary check fire. Another IED strike was reported in Panjwayi District, but it was unclear if this was follow-on reportage of the first incident or if it was another incident.

CFJIC IS2007-7234



As LCol Walker and Major Quick planned the withdrawal from Howz-e Madad, "C" Company, 3 PPCLI in Panjwayi reported that three Canadians on a re-supply run on a Gator vehicle had been blown up by a massive IED. This was a stunning development. It was unlikely that this attack was unrelated to the morning's operations and it was probable that it was designed to draw off resources from the Howz-e Madad operation. Indeed, ISTAR, medical, engineering, and investigative resources would have to be moved and employed in another district. They would have to be protected. They might be ambushed. They might require extraction. And the battlegroup was not yet finished with Howz-

Photo by author



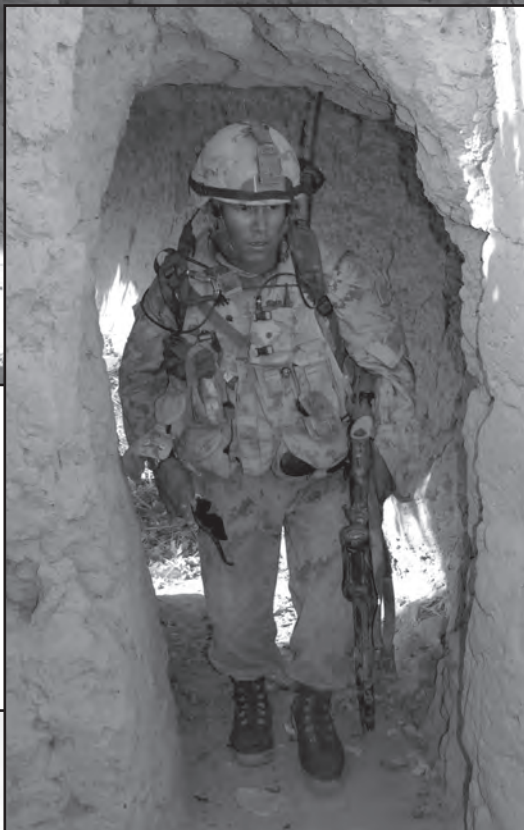


CFJIC IS2007-7267

Above and below: Canadian soldiers search a suspected Taliban compound.

Left: Corporal Cassidy Tait of India Company, 2 RCR returns from clearing an Afghan compound

CFJIC IS2007-7266



CFJIC IS2007-7247





CFJIC IS2007-7250

Private Jamie Burton watches a gate leading from a garden onto a pathway during the operation at Howz-e Madad.

e Madad. Sporadic engagements were occurring around the perimeter.

One of these engagements involved an insurgent equipped with a Dragunov sniper rifle. This individual, firing at a range of 300 metres from a rooftop and then a grape drying hut west of Objective RED, was bracketing his Canadian and Afghan targets but not actually hitting them. What he lacked in experience, he tried to make up with determination. There was talk about using air power to get him, in part to boost the morale of the Afghan troops he was targeting. He was, however, mobile. One of the tank crew commanders reported hearing the “crack-thump” of the Dragunov within 10 metres of his vehicle. The tank was instructed to pop smoke and then pull away from the building so that a 500-pound bomb could be used against the sniper.

The exfiltration of India Company, the Afghans, and the tanks was not simply a matter of driving away. As with every incursion

operation, the danger was that the force would be ambushed on the way back to the MSG FOB. The routes were predictable – Highway 1 to SUMMIT with its culverts, across the Argendab, and into the FOB. It was always possible that suicide vehicle IED specialists from Kandahar City could be requested by Zharey District insurgents to attack along Highway 1. Another cell could use its anti-tank weapons and so on. A variety of deceptive means were employed to reduce this possibility, but the ace in the hole was a pair of AH-64 Apache attack helicopters that suddenly arrived over head, both sporting white “E”s on their undersides. Afghan police would form a cordon between Howz-e Madad and the exfiltrating force while the AH-64’s provided top cover all the way back to MSG. There were no further contacts on the way back to the FOB and now attention shifted to dealing with the aftermath of the Gator attack. This IED incident completely overshadowed the Howz-e Madad operation (which received no Canadian media coverage) and dominated public discourse for



Photo by author

Part of the haul taken back to base for analysis. Note the 82mm recoilless rifle and the brand-new rounds for it-with Chinese markings.

several weeks while pundits debated the blame and merits of using Gators in Afghanistan.

The Results

Operation SEASONS was only one of several similar incursions into Zharey District in the summer of 2007. The cumulative effects of the battlegroup plan are difficult to measure this close to the action, but a tentative assessment can be attempted. First, during the entire battle commercial truck traffic on Highway 1 did not abate at any time, even when there were air strikes in progress and prodigious amounts of tracer arced over the road. Civilian car traffic did not stop either, though it tended to route itself north of the action into the desert and then back on to the highway. Thus far the enemy has been unable to seriously interfere with the movement of coalition or commercial traffic on this route. The Howz-e Madad IED cell was forcibly dismantled and it will take months to replace it.

The enemy has not been able to use Zharey District as a mounting base for conventional operations against Kandahar City. He has not been able to attrit coalition or Afghan forces by using the district as a trap as he has attempted to do in the past. This key terrain remains disputed and is dominated by coalition and Afghan forces. The enemy has only been able to export terrorist violence from Zharey into adjacent districts with limited effect and he certainly does not exert control over the population of the adjacent districts. He has been unable to inflict mass casualties during these operations and has chosen to use massive IED attacks to do so with the intent of generating strategic effects on the population and political leadership in Canada.

In sum, Operation SEASONS successfully built on the base established during previous actions in Zharey District conducted throughout 2006. It demonstrates that denial can be as important as occupation for key terrain, but only temporarily. In order to succeed in Zharey District, the population needs to shift its allegiance to the government side. Until effective governance capacity can be implemented in Zharey District, denial will have to suffice. The enemy's decision to focus on Zharey ultimately benefits the coalition forces and the Afghan government as it permits reconstruction and aid activities to continue elsewhere in the province to the detriment of the Taliban cause. ISAF is happy to oblige them.

Notes

1. In the interests of operational security, certain aspects of the action have been blurred and the names of code-named geographical locations have been changed. The exception is Route SUMMIT, which has appeared regularly in the media.
2. ISTAR or Intelligence Surveillance and Targeting systems is a term used to represent the intelligence community and the various surveillance platforms available to collect the information. Unmanned Aerial Vehicles are ISTAR assets but not all ISTAR assets are UAVs.

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