

Strykers in Afghanistan

*1st Battalion,
17th Infantry Regiment
in Kandahar Province
2009*



Kevin M. Hymel



Combat Studies Institute Press
US Army Combined Arms Center
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Foreword

The US Army's first deployment of a Stryker Brigade Combat Team to Afghanistan in 2009 created expectations similar to those common in 2004, when four Stryker-equipped battalions replaced four brigades from the 101st Airborne Division in northern Iraq. In 2009, soldiers and leaders at all levels expected Stryker-equipped formations to replicate their successes in Iraq, where they had "forged a reputation . . . for moving fast and attacking enemy strongholds all over" that country. Indeed, as the *Army Times* reported, planners and senior leaders in Kabul believed that introducing one or more SBCTs would perhaps revolutionize the fight against the Taliban and other insurgent groups.* And in fact, enemy forces in southern Afghanistan did struggle to find a workable response to the Strykers' speed, mobility, and high number of dismounted infantry.

Those who seek a definitive answer to the question of whether the enemy successfully adapted to the Strykers' presence or why the SBCT mission was changed before its effects against insurgent concentrations became permanent will be disappointed by this work. That question lies beyond the scope of this project. Readers will, however, find a detailed study of the initial operations of the 1st Battalion, 17th Infantry Regiment. Nicknamed the *Buffaloes*, the unit's operational maneuver tempo early in its deployment more than justified the brigade's deployment to Afghanistan. Shrinking time and space in the Arghandab River Valley in ways previous units could only dream of, 1-17's companies blanketed their areas of operations and significantly degraded enemy effectiveness, but at a much higher cost than originally anticipated. Despite this, the battalion made a solid contribution to the fight against the Taliban and associated elements, demonstrating again the Army's wisdom in adopting the Stryker as combat platform. More than a technical validation of the Stryker, however, 1-17's combat record demonstrated again that superior training, discipline, and creative leadership at the squad, platoon, and company level are critical factors in determining the outcome of a given engagement.

Colonel Thomas E. Hanson
Director, Combat Studies Institute

* Michelle Tan, "Pioneering Stryker unit preps for Afghanistan; BCT will be first of its kind in country," in *Army Times*, Apr. 20, 2009 [<http://www.armytimes.com/article/20090420/NEWS/904200316/Pioneering-Stryker-unit-preps-Afghanistan>]

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Chapter 1

Introduction

A staggered line of ten Stryker Infantry Carrier Vehicles moved across the Afghan desert at 20 miles per hour, kicking up dust as they closed on the town of Buyana in Shah Wali Kot District. On 18 August 2009, US leaders had discovered that Taliban insurgents were gathering in the small town located about 25 miles north of the city of Kandahar. American Soldiers, with their rifles and grenade launchers at the ready, stood in the Strykers' air guard hatches. They could see insurgents firing their weapons from rooftops and around corners. The center vehicle stopped at the town's western corner, while other vehicles rolled up to form a "V" Formation. The men inside the Strykers fired their mounted heavy machine guns and automatic grenade launchers, pouring rounds into the buildings while Stryker ramps lowered and teams of Soldiers dismounted to engage the enemy. Others stayed in the hatches, adding their fire to the mounted heavy weapons. The overwhelmed insurgents quickly fled the town. They had not anticipated such a quick attack. The assault marked the first time Strykers were used in conventional operations in Afghanistan.¹

At the dawn of the 21st Century, the US Army adopted a new vehicle for infantry mobility, one designed to carry more Soldiers than either the M113 armored personnel carrier or the M2 Bradley Fighting Vehicle, protected by better armor, adaptable as a weapons platform, capable of a variety of missions, and yet light enough to deploy by aircraft. The new vehicle was the M1126 Stryker Infantry Carrier.² Born of Army Chief of Staff General Eric Shinseki's vision for Army transformation, the eight-wheeled Stryker with medium armor, could deliver nine infantrymen to the battlefield. It was armed with the remote operated weapons system mounted with either a M2HB .50 caliber machine gun or a MK 19 40-mm automatic grenade launcher, allowing the gunner to fire from within the vehicle. Air guard hatches in the rear and a commander's hatch in the front allowed the passengers to fire their weapons while mounted.

A Stryker could carry two more Soldiers than the tracked Bradley, weighed approximately 10 tons less, and could travel 25 miles an hour faster on open roads. The Stryker could also switch from two-wheel drive to eight-wheel drive, saving fuel in urban areas or flat terrain. The Stryker's armor could protect its passengers from small arms fire and artillery bursts, while add-on slat armor—a grid of hardened steel bars surrounding the Stryker like a cage—protected it from rocket-propelled grenades (RPGs). In addition to the infantry carrier, the Army developed a number of variants of the vehicle including a mortar carrier, an engineer vehicle, and the Mobile Gun System (MGS) that was equipped with a 105

mm gun for direct fire support.³ All versions of the vehicle could fit in the Air Force's C-130 Hercules aircraft for rapid deployment. Strykers were designed to be part of a new medium combat formation that could deliver a brigade anywhere in the world in 96 hours, a division in 120 hours and five divisions in 30 days. These brigades would provide more firepower and maneuverability than light infantry forces and more mobility in urban areas than heavy armored forces.⁴



Figure 1. A Mobile Gun System Stryker fires its 105mm cannon.

Photo courtesy US Army

While the Stryker provided an array of advanced systems to enhance situational awareness, the concept of delivering infantry quickly to the battlefield was not new. In World War II, halftracks—open-top trucks with caterpillar tracks instead of rear tires—accompanied tanks and delivered infantry to the battlefield. Fully-tracked vehicles replaced the half-track as infantry carriers during the Cold War and culminated in the Bradley, a new class of carrier known as an “Infantry Fighting Vehicle.” Strykers returned to an all-wheel design and could provide a base of fire for dismounted infantry in a close fight, either from the Infantry Carrier Vehicle’s mounted weapons or the MGS’s 105mm cannon. By providing a base of fire against enemy positions, dismounted squads could maneuver and retain the initiative. Once the troops dismounted, Strykers could be left in place, displace to another location, or move to a laager site to be called upon for linkup.⁵

Stryker brigades consisted of six battalions and five separate companies. The battalions included a reconnaissance, surveillance and target acquisition (RSTA) squadron; an artillery battalion; a support battalion; and three infantry battalions. Separate companies included

anti-tank, engineer, military intelligence, and signal, as well as a brigade headquarters and headquarters company. Each infantry battalion consisted of three rifle companies, each of which had 14 Strykers, an MGS platoon, a mortar section with 60mm mortars, and a sniper team. The battalion's headquarters and headquarters company consisted of a scout platoon, a fire support platoon, a mortar platoon equipped with four 81mm mortars, a sniper squad, and a medical platoon.⁶

Many soldiers in the Stryker brigades were also equipped with the Land Warrior system, a battery-powered ensemble worn by key leaders with battlefield communications, situational awareness and command and control. A lens attached to the helmet flipped down over one of the wearer's eyes to provide real time maps. A thin cable connected the lens to batteries on the Soldier's back. Using a toggle switch—a pistol grip device with thumb-operated cursor—that hung underneath the wearer's armpit, Soldiers could plot enemy and friendly locations, or mark a trail on the map, by dropping virtual markers on certain locations—red for the enemy, blue for friendly forces and yellow for trails. Other Soldiers using Land Warrior could see the dropped makers in their helmet lenses and act accordingly.



Figure 2. Major Ryan O'Connor checks the locations of the battalion's dismounted units with his Land Warrior system. He also wears a PSV14 night vision device over his left eye.

Photo courtesy of Major Ryan O'Connor, US Army

To further enhance battlefield awareness, Stryker vehicles were equipped with communications packages which automatically sensed and displayed friendly forces locations in real time. The system provided every vehicle commander with a common picture of the battlefield, text

messaging, and downloadable maps with varying degrees of resolution.⁷

Conceptually, Strykers made sense, but they still had to prove themselves in the field. During a 2002 exercise at the US Army's National Training Center at Fort Irwin, California, Stryker performance exceeded expectations. One Army study reported, "Soldiers of the National Training Center's Permanent Opposing Force, the 11th Armored Cavalry Regiment, noted that the Stryker went places at greater speeds and with less noise and more agility than any vehicle they had previously encountered. The vehicle's digital communications suite also permitted it to quickly call for a lethal array of supporting fire."⁸

Strykers first saw combat when the 3d Stryker Brigade, 2d Infantry Division (3/2 Stryker), deployed to Iraq in December 2003. The brigade completed its trek from Kuwait to Iraq's Sunni Triangle without the use of the semi-trucks and flatbed heavy equipment transports used to move M1 Abrams tanks or Bradley Fighting Vehicles over long distances. Next assigned to Mosul, elements of the brigade conducted night raids and trained the Iraqi army. With violence growing south of Baghdad, a Stryker battalion was attached to a 1st Infantry Division brigade and sent to the city of Najaf. The enemy ambushed the convoy en route and five RPGs slammed into a Stryker, yet it drove out of the kill zone and completed the journey. When insurgents tried to choke off Baghdad by attacking logistic convoys, Strykers were assigned to provide convoy security. For two months Strykers escorted convoys, losing only four supply trucks to ambushes, compared to eighty-eight trucks prior to the escort mission. In the city of Tal Afar, west of Mosul, Strykers came under increasing RPG fire from insurgent forces, but the vehicles' slat armor defeated most rounds. When insurgents shot down an OH-58D Kiowa Warrior helicopter, Stryker troops raced to the area, secured the helicopter and its injured pilots, and fought off repeated attacks until the helicopter was removed.⁹

In Iraq, Soldiers in Stryker units came to appreciate the vehicle's quiet engines which allowed them to stealthily approach targets. The vehicle also held a greater load capacity and provided better protection than the High Mobility Multipurpose Wheeled Vehicle (HMMWV or Humvee). While the 3d Brigade lost 13 Soldiers to combat during its deployment, none were killed inside Strykers that ran over IEDs or came under fire. One Stryker battalion officer reported, "The Soldiers gained a lot of confidence in their vehicles when they realized they had a platform that could take a lot of punishment."¹⁰

While Stryker units performed well in Iraq, a new battlefield called. On 16 February 2009, the Obama Administration ordered two combat brigades to Afghanistan to provide security for the country's upcoming national election in the fall. One of those units was the 5th Stryker Brigade Combat Team (SBCT), 2d Infantry Division (5/2 Stryker), which was preparing to deploy to Iraq. Instead, it was reassigned to Kandahar city and the surrounding area where Major General Mart de Kruif of the Royal Netherlands Army, the commander of the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) Regional Command-South (RC-South), lacked sufficient troops to deal with an enemy who seemed to be surging in Kandahar and its environs.¹¹ General de Kruif needed more boots on the ground. "I actually didn't care whether these troops were Marines, light, medium or mechanized infantry," de Kruif later wrote, "as long as they brought these boots with them."¹²

While Kandahar City was de Kruif's priority, he also wanted to disrupt the enemy's lines of communication that ran from Pakistan through Kandahar to central Helmand Province. To do this, he planned to deploy a brigade-size US Marine Expeditionary Unit in Helmand Province, the 5/2 Stryker in Kandahar Province, and use Afghan National Security Forces within Kandahar City. De Kruif knew that widely-accepted counterinsurgency doctrine called for deploying forces where the bulk of the people lived, but the lines of communications, tribal politics and his understanding of the local insurgency led him to this unique deployment. "It was clear that there was a strong political will to hand over the lead in counterinsurgency to the Afghans as soon as possible," explained de Kruif, who wanted to take the long-term approach. "The priority for the deployment [in Kandahar City] of forces should be on indigenous forces, and not the ISAF."¹³

The 5/2 Stryker, commanded by Colonel Harry Tunnell IV, arrived in Kandahar in the summer of 2009 to secure the city's approaches. He deployed his four maneuver battalions in and around the city. The 2d Battalion, 1st Infantry Regiment (2-1 IN) was retained under RC-South as the Regional Reserve Force in Kandahar; Task Force *Zabol*, which included the 4th Battalion, 23d Infantry, and the Romanian 280th Battalion, deployed to Zabol Province along the Pakistani border to secure the routes leading southwest from that province into Kandahar; the 8th Squadron, 1st Cavalry (8-1 CAV) deployed to the south of the city; and the 1st Battalion, 17th Infantry Regiment (1-17 IN) secured the northern approaches into the city through the verdant Arghandab River Valley and mountainous Shah Wali Kot districts.

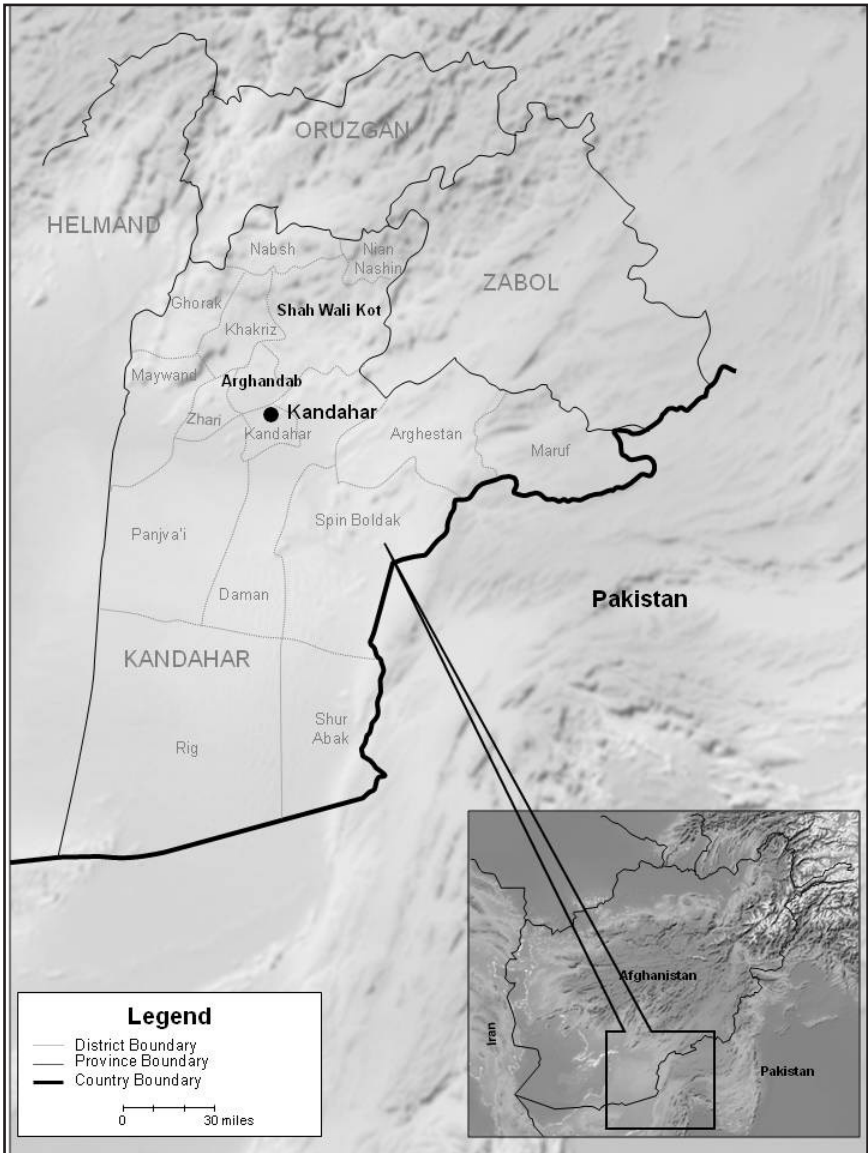


Figure 3. Map of Kandahar Province.

Source: author/CSI generated

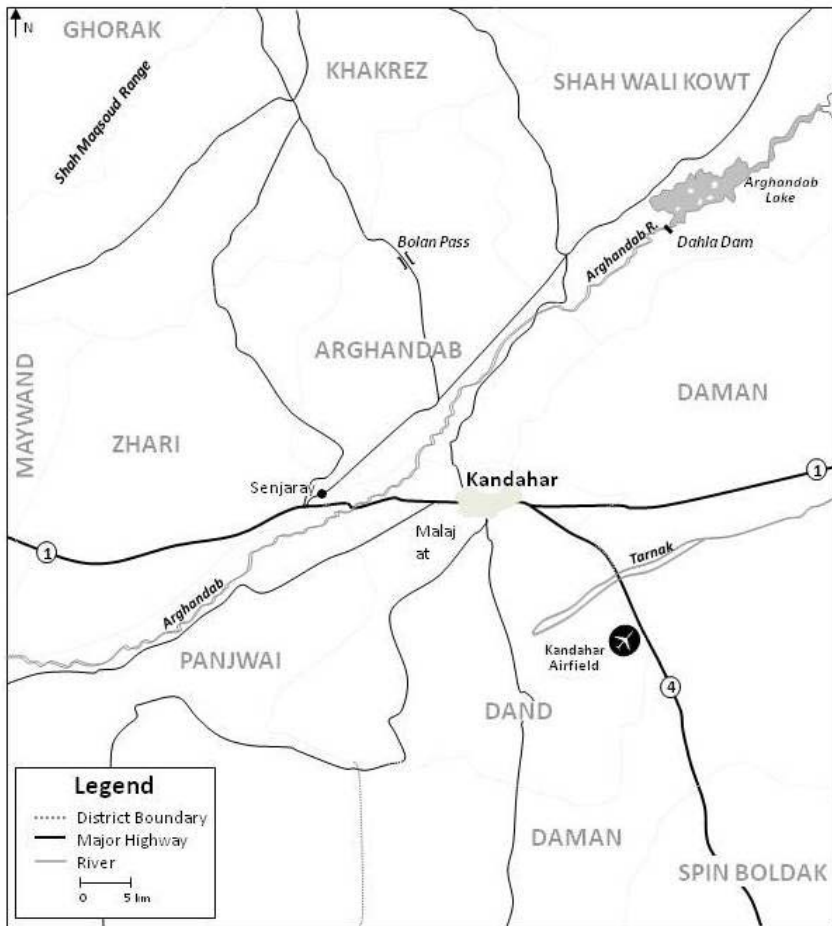


Figure 4. The city of Kandahar and surrounding districts.

Source: author/CSI generated

Each of the brigade's battalions operated in difficult terrain against enemy forces determined to prevent any Coalition gains in the region. In the Arghandab Valley and the Shah Wali Kot District, however, 1-17 IN faced complex landscapes that had become well-established insurgent bases. In the middle of August 2009, just two weeks after their arrival in Afghanistan, Coalition commanders directed the battalion to conduct BUFFALO STAMPEDE, a major operation to secure polling sites for the presidential election. Once the elections were complete, 1-17 IN immediately launched OPPORTUNITY HOLD to clear the enemy from the west bank of the Arghandab River Valley and establish two combat

outposts for future operations. In both missions, Soldiers maneuvered on roads and pathways sown with lethal Improvised Explosive Devices (IEDs), engaged experienced and committed insurgent forces in fields, orchards, and villages, all in temperatures that exceeded 100 degrees Fahrenheit. This book recounts the actions of the 1-17 IN in these two operations that tested the Stryker unit's organization and equipment as well as the resolve of its Soldiers.

Notes

1. In 2005, the 2d Battalion, 75th Regiment (Ranger) used a small number of Strykers in non-conventional operations.

2. Mark Reardon and Jeffrey A. Charleston, *From Transformation to Combat: The First Stryker Brigade at War* (Center of Military History: Washington, D.C., 2007), 19.

3. The Stryker came in nine other variants to provide a mix of capabilities on the battlefield: (1) the M1127 Reconnaissance Vehicle provided situational awareness by gathering and transmitting real-time intelligence; (2) the M1128 Mobile Gun System (MGS) mounted a 105mm main gun for direct fire support; (3) the M1129 Mortar Carrier contained a 120-mm mortar; (4) the M1130 Commander's Vehicle possessed advanced communications systems; (5) the M1131 Fire Support Vehicle provided enhanced surveillance and target acquisition along with identification, tracking, and designation abilities; (6) the M1132 Engineering Squad Vehicle towed a Mine Clearing Line Charge (MICLIC), employed equipment such as mine rollers, mine plows and a lane-marking system; (7) the M1133 Medical Evacuation Vehicle could carry six ambulatory patients or four litter patients; (8) the M1134 Anti-Tank Guided Missile Vehicle mounted an elevated tube-launched, optically-tracked, wire-guided (TOW) missile; and (9) the M1135 Nuclear, Biological, and Chemical (NBC) detected NBC threats. The common chassis reduced maintenance as well as the inventory of repair parts and logistical requirements, allowing for rapid overseas deployment with a reduced logistical footprint.

4. John Sloan Brown, *Kevlar Legions: The Transformation of the U.S. Army, 1989-2005* (Center of Military History: Washington, D.C., 2011) 196, 197, 202; "M1126 Stryker Infantry Carrier Vehicle" Gary's Combat Vehicle Reference Guide, <http://www.inetres.com/gp/military/cv/inf/M1126.html>; "M1126 Stryker Infantry Carrier Vehicle" Gary's Combat Vehicle Reference Guide, <http://www.inetres.com/gp/military/cv/inf/M2.html>; Reardon and Charleston, 17.

5. Department of the Army, *Army Tactics, Techniques and Procedures (ATTP) 3-21.9, SBCT Infantry Rifle Platoon and Squad* (Headquarters, Department of the Army: Washington, DC, December, 2010), 3-18 to 3-20.

6. Raun Watson, "Stryker Brigade Combat Teams" Briefing, October 2009, slide 4.

7. Brown, 266.

8. Reardon and Charleston, 14.

9. Reardon and Charleston, 27, 32, 35, 39, 47, 53, 57.

10. Robert Cameron, *To Fight or Not to Fight?: Organizational and Doctrinal Trends in Mounted Maneuver Reconnaissance from the Interwar Years to Operation IRAQI FREEDOM* (Combat Studies Institute: Fort Leavenworth,

2010) 512; Reardon and Charleston, 46, 65, 70; Master Sergeant Troy Favor, interview by Kevin M. Hymel, Combat Studies Institute, Fort Leavenworth, KS, 18 September 2012, 7.

11. Rajiv Chandrasekaran, *Little America: The War Within the War for Afghanistan* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2012) 51, 52, 158; Bob Woodward, *Obama's Wars* (New York: Simon & Shuster, 2010) 96-98.

12. Lieutenant General Mart de Kruif, e-mail to Kevin M. Hymel, Combat Studies Institute, Fort Leavenworth, KS, 14 August 2013.

13. Lieutenant General Mart de Kruif, e-mail to Kevin M. Hymel, Combat Studies Institute, Fort Leavenworth, KS, 14 August 2013.

Chapter 2

Securing the Election

The 1st Battalion, 17th Infantry (1-17 IN), known as the *Buffaloes*, had a lot to accomplish in its first operation but little time in which to do it. Arriving at Forward Operating Base (FOB) Frontenac, 30 miles north of Kandahar Airfield (KAF) in southern Afghanistan on 7 August 2009, the battalion had only two weeks to prepare for its security role during Afghanistan's presidential election. The march from KAF to FOB Frontenac, its occupation, and all other tasks leading up to the elections were components of the battalion's security mission, Operation BUFFALO STAMPEDE.

The 1-17 IN traced its lineage back to the American Civil War, in which the 17th Infantry Regiment fought under the Army of the Potomac. The unit then participated in the Indian Wars, the Spanish-American War, the Philippine-American War, and the Punitive Expedition into Mexico. During World War II, the unit, assigned to the 7th Infantry Division, fought in the Pacific Theater, where it conducted amphibious assaults on Attu and Kwajalein islands, the Philippines and Okinawa. When the Korean War broke out, the unit landed at Inchon with the rest of the 7th Infantry Division and remained in the field for its duration. It was in Korea that the unit received the "Buffalo" designation, after Colonel William "Buffalo Bill" Quinn, the unit's commander. A single company of the unit fought in Vietnam. The battalion also participated in Operation IRAQI FREEDOM from 2005 to 2006.¹

Lieutenant Colonel Jonathan Neumann commanded the *Buffaloes* in Afghanistan. A 1989 graduate of the US Military Academy, Neumann had seen combat as a platoon leader in the 82d Airborne Division in Operation DESERT STORM. In Iraq in 2004, he had served as a battalion executive officer for the 25th Infantry Division's 1st Battalion, 21st Infantry, also a Stryker unit. He took command of the 1-17 IN almost two years before it deployed to Afghanistan and trained it at Joint Base Lewis-McChord, Washington. At six feet two inches tall, Neumann towered over most of his Soldiers as well as most Afghans. With a shaved head, he stood out whenever he took off his helmet.²



Figure 5. Lieutenant Colonel Jonathan T. Neumann (Left) commanded the 1st Battalion, 17th Infantry, during its deployment to Afghanistan in 2009-2010.

Photo courtesy Lieutenant Colonel Jonathan Neumann

While based at FOB Frontenac, Neumann's area of operations (AO) included the parts of the Kakhrez District to the northwest, the Shah Wali Kot District to the northeast and the Arghandab District to the southwest. Kakhrez and Shah Wali Kot were mountainous, desert areas, while the Arghandab was mostly desert except along the Arghandab River, where the irrigated land supported pomegranate orchards, grape fields and heavy vegetation, all cut by canals or separated by earthen walls. The dense foliage made for excellent defensive positions and hampered line-of-sight radio transmissions, making situational understanding at times difficult. The Soldiers referred to the lush Arghandab Valley as the "Green Zone." Highway 617, designated Route BEAR, connected the three districts with FOB Frontenac and Kandahar city. Route BEAR, the only paved road in the area, ran northeast to southwest and entered Kandahar city from the west. Route RED DOG, an unpaved road, ran parallel to Route BEAR, west of the Arghandab River. The two routes merged eight kilometers south of FOB Frontenac.

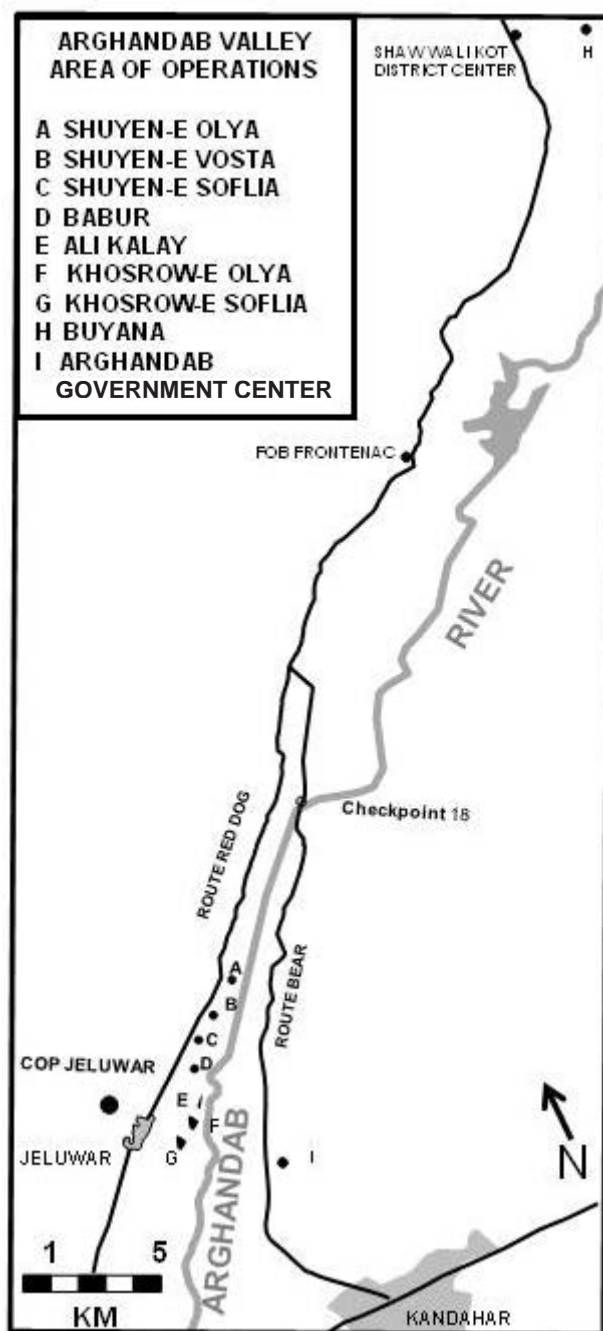


Figure 6. Key terrain of the Arghandab "Green Zone."

Source: author/CSI generated

Between 1979 and 2009, the Arghandab River Valley saw intense combat. During the Soviet-Afghan War, both the Soviets and the *Mujahideen* mined the fields around Kandahar city, forcing most of the civilian population in and around the city to flee to Pakistan. In the summer of 1987 the Soviet Army and its Democratic Republic of Afghanistan (DRA) allies attempted to push the *Mujahideen* out of their well-established fighting positions in the towns of Babur and Jelawur. For a month, Soviet tanks and armored personnel carriers (APCs) tried to penetrate the grape fields and orchards while airstrikes and artillery pounded strong points. *Mujahideen* fighters, hunkered down in bunkers with a few scouts positioned outside, waited for the bombardment to pass, and then engaged the DRA. When the DRA troops closed to within 10 meters, the *Mujahideen* would fire, ensuring that the DRA soldiers could not escape. By the end of the campaign, the *Mujahideen* had killed some 250 Soviet and DRA soldiers, wounded approximately 800, captured more than 100 vehicles, and accepted 2,500 defectors from the DRA into their ranks.³

After the Soviets withdrew in 1989, the country gradually fell into a civil war three years later. In the spring of 1994, as rival tribes and warlords fought each other, the newly-formed Taliban captured Kandahar City under the leadership of a charismatic cleric named Mullah Omar. As the Taliban made gains on the battlefield, it also welcomed foreign fighters into its ranks. Osama Bin Laden's al Qaeda organization came to Afghanistan in 1996 and moved to Kandahar the following year, setting up a training camp near the Kandahar Airfield.⁴

When the United States and its allies launched Operation ENDURING FREEDOM on 7 October 2001, American bombers pounded Taliban bases and infrastructure while the Northern Alliance, with the help of Army Special Forces, drove them from the country. Kandahar fell on 7 December, but both Mullah Omar and Osama Bin Laden escaped. In Bonn two days earlier, a United Nations conference nominated Hamid Karzai, an anti-Taliban Pashtun, to head a provisional Afghan administration. For the next four years, Kandahar Province remained relatively calm as the United States kept its forces low in Afghanistan. But during this period, the Taliban slowly regrouped and infiltrated back from Pakistan—many returned to their homes in Kandahar Province. By 2006, when a Canadian battalion assumed responsibility for the province, its soldiers found the enemy ensconced in Kandahar's districts. Insurgents ambushed Canadian patrols or planted roadside IEDs, while both sides fought pitched battles west of the city. The next year the Taliban shattered the local militia

blocking their entrance to Kandahar city from the north. The number of civilians killed either by suicide bombers or caught in crossfire in the city rose. The security situation eroded further in 2008 when the Taliban attacked the Sarposa Prison and freed 1,100 inmates, many of whom were captured Taliban fighters. Making matters worse, the Arghandab District police chief was wounded, forcing his evacuation. In his absence, police leadership fell apart. The firefights, suicide bombings and IEDs continued unabated into 2009.⁵

This was the situation around Kandahar City when the *Buffaloes* arrived. To make matters worse, Lieutenant Colonel Neumann learned that the Afghan National Army (ANA) soldiers' enlistments in his AO were about to expire. They had been operating for a long time far from their homes in northern Afghanistan without leave. "They were kind of burned out," explained Neumann.⁶ Adding this problem to the loss of the local police chief and an ineffective local militia, Neumann decided he had "a perfect storm" of trouble on his hands.⁷

The 750-strong American battalion replaced a 72-man Canadian reconnaissance troop and a Canadian Operational Mentor Liaison Teams (OMLT, pronounced "omelet") that advised ANA units, half of which had been based at FOB Frontenac. "[The Canadians] just kind of had their finger in the dike," said Neumann.⁸ The Canadians did have one thing in common with their American cousins: they were equipped with Light Armored Vehicles (LAVs), the same basic vehicle as the Stryker. Unfortunately, the relief in place did not go smoothly. The Canadians provided the *Buffaloes* with written briefings, radio transcripts and anything else to learn about the enemy and conditions on the ground; however, almost everything was written in French. During the relief in place process, the RC-South Staff briefed 5/2 Stryker that there were only approximately 30 or 40 Taliban in the area. Yet when they conducted combined reconnaissance missions down Route BEAR during the transition period, the Canadians would point into the thick green fields that bordered the road and explain to the Americans that, because of the small size of their force, they did not go into those areas.⁹

In order to accomplish their mission, the Americans planned to go where the Canadians had not. Operation BUFFALO STAMPEDE's goal was to provide security for the national elections scheduled for 20 August 2009. Neumann first needed to identify the approximately 25 polling sites to protect while supporting the Afghan Security forces. It would not be easy. The list of sites provided by the brigade was incomplete, containing grid coordinates for some locations but not others. Some villages lacked

names. “Some are easy to find,” said Major Ryan O’Connor, the battalion operations officer, “others are almost impossible.”¹⁰ The *Buffaloes* would serve as a quick reaction force (QRF) for the ANA and Afghan National Police (ANP) because, as Neumann later said, “nobody wanted to see American Soldiers guarding polling places.”¹¹

The upcoming elections were vital to Afghanistan’s future. The first national election in 2004 drew a 75 percent voter turnout. Hamid Karzai, then the interim president, was elected with 55.3 percent of the vote. Now, with a resurgent Taliban bent on keeping people away from the polling booths, Coalition forces had to ensure a safe election. During the 2004 election the Taliban controlled only 30 of Afghanistan’s districts. In 2009 they controlled 164.¹² The *Buffaloes* would have to guarantee voters safe passage through a wave of enemy activity.

Neumann’s battalion contained four companies: Captain John Hallett’s Alpha (“Attu”) Company, Captain James “Jamie” Pope’s Bravo (“Bayonet”) Company, Captain Joel Kassulke’s Charlie (“Chosin”) Company, and Captain Joshua Glonek’s Headquarters and Headquarters Company (HHC). All the company commanders were West Point graduates. Neumann sent Hallett’s Alpha Company north to Shah Wali Kot District. He sent Pope’s Bravo and Kassulke’s Charlie companies south to the Arghandab Valley. Bravo Company would patrol the west side of the Arghandab River, based out of Combat Outpost (COP) Jelawur, while Charlie Company patrolled the east side from the Arghandab Joint District Control Center. Glonek’s HHC coordinated security for FOB Frontenac. Since Alpha Company had the largest AO but the smallest population, Neumann used it as his economy of force and peeled off that company’s assets to assist Bravo and Charlie companies whenever needed. To ensure election security, Neumann ordered his units to scout out the enemy’s most likely avenues of approach to the polling sites, then set up observation posts and blocking positions.¹³

For this first operation, the companies lacked mine detectors and bomb sniffing dogs, to the frustration of the men. Other equipment of dubious value to their mission was in abundant supply. “We had too much equipment,” explained Captain Glonek, who was given a nine-pound underwater camera during the deployment.¹⁴ Other pieces of equipment required training for which the men did not have time. “I’d say I don’t want it and I was told ‘it doesn’t matter, you have to sign for it.’”¹⁵

While the *Buffaloes*’ rifle companies were ready to operate, Neumann’s tactical operations center (TOC) was not. Seven equipment containers were

missing, all filled with communications and support materials. Neumann's staff adapted by working from paper maps or writing on the battalion headquarters' walls with dry-erase markers. They also worked out of their tactical command post (TAC) Strykers. The lack of equipment would hinder Neumann's ability to see and understand what was happening with his companies temporarily as the election drew near.¹⁶

First Contact

With the clock ticking down to the election, Captain Pope's Bravo Company conducted an area reconnaissance in the Arghandab on 10 August. His AO included ten ANP checkpoints along Route RED DOG.¹⁷ The lushness of the Green Zone, with so many mud walls separating the grape rows and pomegranate orchards, proved frustrating to the Soldiers. "We're talking about a maze," explained Pope.¹⁸

To ensure safe travel down Route BEAR, a route clearance platoon from the 562d Engineer Company—referred to as a Route Clearance Package (RCP)—preceded Bravo Company, checking for IEDs. The journey did not last long. Two hours into the mission, just outside the town of Shuyen-e Sofla, the lead Engineer Squad Vehicle (ESV), a Stryker equipped with a mine roller, fell victim to a command-detonated IED. The explosion destroyed all eight tires and injured two engineers, one with a broken arm and the other with a leg injury. Pope called for a MEDEVAC, which flew the two men out of danger. The engineers were on edge as they continued searching, but had only traveled about 50 feet when another Stryker triggered a second IED. No one was injured but the company stopped while Pope waited for trucks to tow the two damaged vehicles back to FOB Frontenac.¹⁹

The men found the control wire for the first IED leading into a pomegranate orchard. Pope ordered two squads, one from First Lieutenant Daniel Boirum's 3d Platoon and one from First Lieutenant Daniel Berschinski's 2d Platoon, to dismount and move into Shuyen-e Sofla to question villagers while the rest of the Soldiers guarded the vehicles. Boirum's men led the way through the empty town, finding only a small group of children playing in an orchard. When the pilot of an OH-58 Kiowa Warrior helicopter flying overwatch reported a group of 11 military-aged males on the south end of town, Pope directed Boirum and Berschinski to move toward their location. He then joined the two units.²⁰

Boirum's men pushed south through the town and an adjacent open field until they reached a narrow road between mud walls. A pomegranate field and a canal were to their left. As the Soldiers approached an L-shaped

turn with another wall to their front, they heard a loud “ka-chunk,” the sound of a PKM machine gun’s bolt hammering forward, but failing to fire.²¹ Insurgents then opened up with AK-47 rifles from behind the wall to the Americans’ front. Specialist Richard Thibeault took a round to the chest from only 20 feet and dropped to his knees. Staff Sergeant Joshua Meyers grabbed him and threw him behind cover while returning fire. Everyone else opened fire at the enemy muzzle flashes. Despite his pain, Thibeault emptied his magazine at the enemy and, as he reloaded, slipped his hand underneath his body armor. When he didn’t see any blood he shouted to Meyers that he was okay and continued to fight.²²

Boirum shouted for Berschinski to move up. The Soldiers behind him shouted to pull back. “No!” Boirum shouted, “Move up! Get on line!”²³ But Berschinski, to his surprise, had no one available to reinforce Boirum. His squad was missing. When the enemy first opened fire, Berschinski’s men charged across the open field and found protection against a wall at a 90-degree angle from Boirum’s engagement. Captain Pope, who was with Berschinski, wanted to act but his options were limited. He couldn’t go left because of the canal and he couldn’t go forward because of the enemy. His Land Warrior System, however, showed him a number of alleyways on his right flank, so he called for Staff Sergeant Daniel Rhodes to follow him and took off for the alley. Rhodes, who had just crossed the open field, led the squad after Pope. This was when Berschinski, unaware of Pope’s action, turned around and noticed his entire squad gone.²⁴

First Lieutenant Victor Cortese, the company fire support officer, stood near Pope but close enough to Boirum that, when he heard Boirum shout and saw the desperation in his eyes, he joined the fight to the front. An enemy RPG ricocheted off the wall in front of Boirum and shot up into the air, temporarily deafening him. At that same time, two of Boirum’s men, who were at the front and armed with M-203 grenade launchers, bounded back to Boirum’s position to gain the grenades’ minimum arming distance of approximately 25 meters. “They ended up going through their entire loads of 203 HE [high explosive] rounds,” recalled Boirum.²⁵ Enemy fire tapered off as the rounds exploded, allowing Boirum’s men to consolidate and find better cover.²⁶

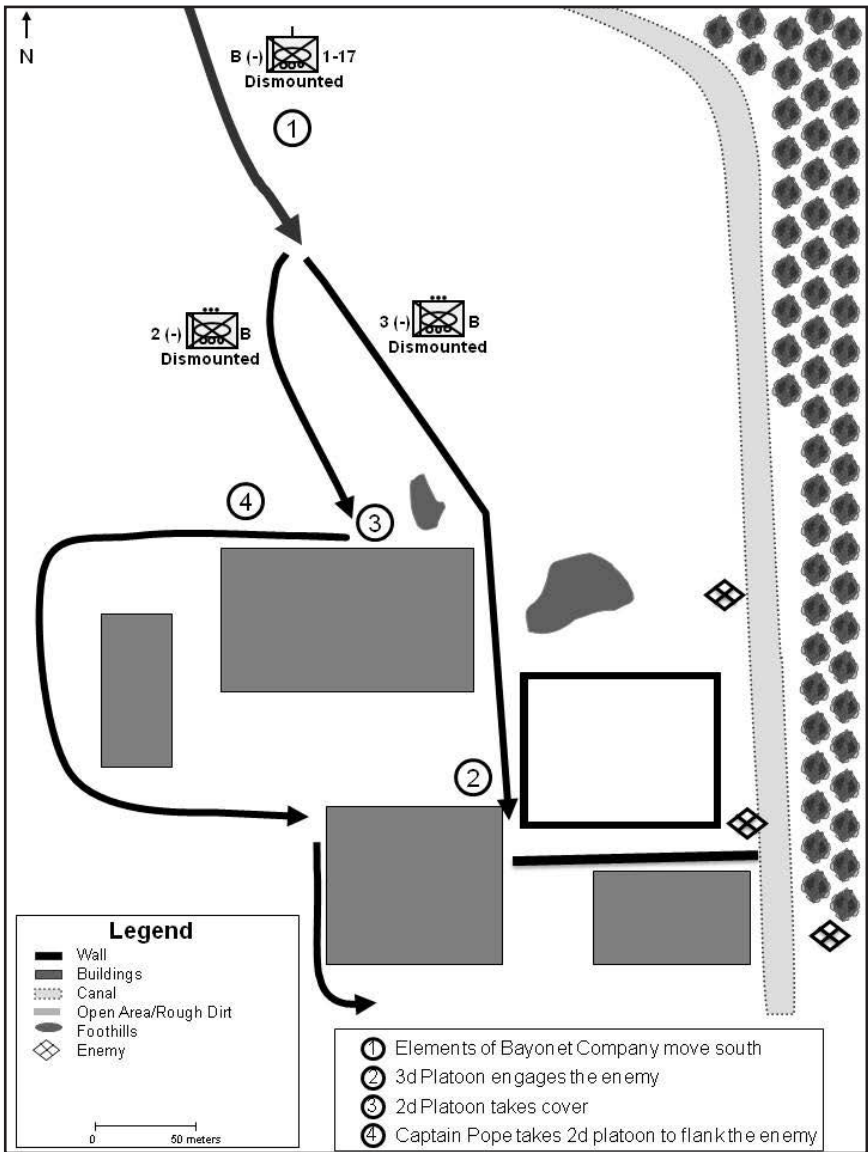


Figure 7. Bravo Company engages the enemy in Shuyen-e Sofa.

Source: author/CSI generated



Figure 8. First Lieutenant Victor Cortese (left) checks a map while Captain James Pope (right) uses his Land Warrior system during a patrol in the Arghandab's Green Zone.

Photo courtesy of Major James Pope, US Army

Meanwhile, Pope led Rhodes' squad down the alley. He contacted a Stryker to support Boirum with its machine guns, but the Stryker's vehicle commander could not see through the maze of buildings to where the fire was coming from, 500 meters away. The vehicle commander ended up following Pope's men as close as the terrain allowed. Pope turned the corner around a building and suddenly ran into a barricade not marked on his Land Warrior system. His force circled around a wide compound and through a maze of alleys and mud walls, while he placed men in positions to suppress enemy fire and continue advancing. He could hear the 40-mm rounds fired by Boirum's men exploding to his left, but buildings, walls and barricades prevented his men from engaging the enemy. When a Taliban truck pulled up behind the insurgents on the opposite side of the canal, Rhodes tried to suppress the insurgents around it while Pope tried to push the men forward, but they were stopped by the canal and another barricade. Finally, Rhodes bounded across the canal, continually firing at the enemy as they retreated.²⁷

At Boirum's position, rounds flew in between Boirum, his radio telephone operator (RTO) and his squad automatic weapon (SAW) gunner, Specialist Andrew Bellach. Two enemy fighters had flanked Boirum on his left. Bellach returned fire with his SAW, hitting one of the insurgents in the chest. The wounded man went down while his companion ran off. With his hearing slowly returning, Boirum got on the radio and called his Strykers forward, but he still could not hear a response and prepared to pull his men back to First Lieutenant Berschinski's position.²⁸

Berschinski meanwhile, had radioed for a Stryker to pick him up and marked his location with a smoke grenade. Unfortunately, the vehicle went the wrong way, and once the driver corrected himself, hit a berm, ripping off his front left tire. An engineer Stryker then arrived to pick up Berschinski. He and his RTO jumped inside and Berschinski ordered the driver to take him to Boirum's position. At the same time, First Sergeant Tony Holcomb drove up to Boirum in a Mine Resistant Ambush Protected (MRAP) vehicle equipped with a .50-caliber machine gun. But he did not need the weapon; once the enemy saw the vehicle they withdrew. As the engineer Stryker with Berschinski arrived, Pope showed up with Rhodes' squad. The fight was over. A few Soldiers assisted Thibeault into the MRAP, while the rest mounted their Strykers and returned to the damaged engineer vehicles.²⁹

At battalion headquarters, Lieutenant Colonel Neumann monitored the entire action. He decided not to involve himself personally with the firefight, trusting Pope's leadership, even though the battalion stood ready to provide additional resources upon Pope's request. "Captain Pope was aggressively reacting to combat," Neumann later explained, "and [he] didn't need either our help or our injection of a bunch of questions that would slow down his actions."³⁰

Pope's company secured the disabled engineer Strykers as the men waited for the arrival of recovery vehicles. Berschinski's platoon took up a position on the edge of the town facing a pomegranate orchard. Instead of ordering his men into the overgrown orchard, Berschinski had them fire their machine guns into it. Nothing happened so the men stayed in place until ordered to pull back. Before leaving, Berschinski had his men sweep all the empty casings and water bottles into the canal to keep the enemy guessing about his position. "I didn't want to leave any signs that we had been there," Berschinski later explained.³¹ The next day, Pope's men continued to secure the area, even driving a Stryker through a wall, giving the men access to the orchards. Canadian engineers finally arrived and removed the three disabled vehicles.³²

The engagement revealed an important shortcoming: the *Buffaloes* did not have the equipment required to recover damaged or destroyed Strykers and had to rely initially on the Canadians for catastrophic vehicle extraction. Later, 1-17 IN received a recovery package from a US support unit that included two wreckers and a flatbed truck. Throughout their training in the United States, the *Buffaloes* had trained for vehicle recovery, but the “disabled” vehicle always had at least two operable wheels. In combat, IEDs often blew all the wheels off a Stryker. Only the Canadians, who had been dealing with destroyed LAVs since 2006, were prepared to deal with the situation.³³

In order to counter any Taliban operations aimed at disrupting the election, Captain Pope tried to be proactive. Two days later he sent First Lieutenant Berschinski’s 2d Platoon on a dismounted night patrol to identify enemy infiltration routes. Pope picked what he thought was a good site on a map and Berschinski led his men out into the darkness. They walked through numerous fields and climbed over walls trying to find the location, only to be channelized by walls and buildings. Finally, after almost five hours of searching, Berschinski contacted Pope, reporting that the terrain was horrible and that he was in danger of getting ambushed. “Someone’s going to toss a grenade over a wall and take out my platoon because we can’t see anything.” Pope agreed and called Berschinski back.³⁴



Figure 9. First Lieutenant Daniel Berschinski, standing in his Stryker's commander's hatch, leads his platoon out of FOB Frontenac. A Mobile Gun System (MGS) Stryker is in the background to the right.

Courtesy First Lieutenant Daniel Berschinski, US Army

The Scouts Enter the Fray

On 14 August, once the battalion headquarters was in place at FOB Frontenac, Lieutenant Colonel Neumann ordered elements of his scout platoon to check out the area around the base. Captain Adam Swift led the scout platoon. A graduate of the Air Force Academy, Swift had instead chosen an Army commission. "I was going to be an intel[ligence] officer in the Air Force and I figured that was going to be kind of boring," he explained.³⁵ So he set his sights on the Army. There would be no lack of excitement in Afghanistan.

Swift was leading a four-vehicle Stryker patrol west of FOB Frontenac when an IED detonated directly beneath his Stryker, penetrating the hull and ripping off all eight tires. Swift, who had been standing in the commander's hatch, awoke upside down on the floor. The blast cracked his pelvis and shredded the legs of both Sergeant Tanner Kuth and Specialist Derek Ford, who had been sitting across from each other. The driver, Private First Class Joshua Seaver, was knocked unconscious. Men yelled and screamed inside the Stryker as alarms went off. Dust and smoke filled the vehicle. "There was blood and stuff everywhere," recalled Swift.³⁶

The second Stryker immediately pulled up and dropped its ramp. Scouts and snipers poured out and set up a security perimeter while the wounded men were pulled out of the damaged Stryker. One sniper team positioned themselves atop a ridge. Inside the damaged Stryker, Seaver awoke, opened his hatch and spotted armed men on the ridge. Thinking they were insurgents, he aimed his rifle at them. Using his Advanced Combat Optical Gun Sight, he drew a bead on the Soldiers, but as he clicked off the rifle's safety, he realized he was looking at American snipers.³⁷ He then ran up the hill and asked the snipers if they needed any help. They made him sit down and checked his eyes for signs of a concussion, or as Seaver remembered it, "seeing if I wasn't crazy because I just got blown up and knocked out."³⁸

The platoon sergeant, Sergeant First Class Bryan Wells, in the last vehicle, called for a MEDEVAC and organized security. He came across Swift, who was trying to take charge of the situation despite a heavy concussion. "I really didn't know what was going on," Swift later confessed.³⁹ Wells told Swift that he had everything under control and sat him down. As the men set up a pick-up zone for the helicopter, Captain Glonek arrived with elements of Hatchet Company, escorting a Stryker ambulance. Swift wanted to stay with his men, but Glonek insisted he see the medics and offered that he could come back in the morning. The three men were loaded into the ambulance. Kuth would eventually have a leg amputated while Ford suffered fractured ankles. The rest of the Soldiers

spent a quiet night guarding the damaged Stryker. The next morning a Canadian team, driving an oversized wrecker and trailer, arrived and pulled the Stryker onto the trailer's bed.⁴⁰ Between Bravo Company's engagement with the enemy in Shuyen-e Sofla and the Scout's experience outside FOB Frontenac, the *Buffaloes* were quickly learning that the enemy was quite proficient in using mines to blunt 1-17's combat power.

Two Fights at Once: Alpha and Bravo Companies in Combat

With the election only two days away, on 18 August First Lieutenant Zachary Osborne learned from the ANP that insurgents were gathering in a town called Buyana, southeast of the Shah Wali Kot District Center. Osborne, the 2d Platoon leader for Alpha Company, led his platoon out of the district center in four Strykers. Three carried his three squads and a sniper section, while the fourth was an M1129 Mortar Carrier. Since the ANA and ANP were familiar with the area, Osborne let them take the lead in their Ford pickup trucks. When they reached the town around 1500, the ANP occupied a large hilltop south of the village while Osborne and Staff Sergeant Robert Montez positioned their two Strykers on the west side of the hill and Sergeant First Class Troy Faver and the mortar carrier stopped on the east side, approximately 300 meters from Osborne and Montez.⁴¹

Osborne dismounted and led a rifle squad into the town where he met with the town elder, who told him that his people had beaten the Russians with picks and shovels. Sergeant Pedro Colunga did not like the sound of that and warned Osborne that something was wrong, but Osborne told him they still needed to search the village.⁴² The meeting had only gone on for a few minutes when Osborne heard a rifle shot. He looked at the elder and, through a translator, asked, "Is that Taliban?" The elder responded, "Yeah, probably."⁴³

Osborne ran back to his Stryker as the enemy, hiding in a curved *wadi* to the north, engaged the Americans with automatic weapons and RPGs. Soon, the insurgents began firing mortars at the ANP on top of the hill, wounding two Afghans. The ANP fired wildly in response, expending almost all their ammunition in just a few minutes. Sergeant First Class Faver sent Staff Sergeant Rick Briolla and a medic out to help the ANP, but as they climbed the hill enemy mortar rounds began exploding around them and they quickly returned to their Stryker. One round exploded near Sergeant Colunga, knocking him to the ground. He immediately checked his legs and was relieved to discover they were still attached. The ANP, out of ammunition, ran down the hill, climbed into their vehicles, and roared away. The ANA joined them.⁴⁴

Osborne dispatched his sniper team to a side of the hill to fire down onto the enemy, then deployed the mortar Stryker to maintain rear security while Faver anchored the right side of his position on the hill with his Stryker. The Strykers returned fire with their M240 machine guns and Mk19 grenade launchers while Soldiers stood and fired from the Strykers' hatches. In Faver's Stryker, Briolla stood in an air-guard hatch firing rounds when he suddenly yelled at Faver, "RPG! RPG!" just as the round screeched over his head. Faver immediately began conducting survivability drills—moving his Stryker in bursts every few minutes to prevent the enemy from locking on to his position—and he directed the other vehicles to do the same. Faver's gunner, Specialist Benjamin Swaing, wanted to unload his Mk 19 at the village, but Faver refused. "[Not] Unless we have positive ID on the enemy," he told Swaing, "we're not going to engage."⁴⁵ Swaing saw an insurgent crawling low by a house and fired grenades at him until the man stopped moving.⁴⁶

The snipers engaged the enemy within the town and the surrounding brush. While two snipers suppressed insurgents with their M24 rifles, Sergeant Keith Brantley fired his M110 rifle. Osborne's Stryker circled around the left side of the hill, shooting down at the enemy to their right until they came under fire from the high ground to the left. The enemy's fast movement surprised Osborne. "It was extremely quick," he recalled, "how they adjusted to our maneuvers—they had a group encircle us."⁴⁷ The enemy was so close that the Americans were throwing hand grenades out of their hatches.⁴⁸

Enemy fire intensified. Two RPGs impacted on Staff Sergeant Montez's Stryker but failed to explode. When Montez's MK19 grenade launcher ran out of grenades, he climbed onto the deck of his Stryker to reload it and caught shrapnel in his face when an enemy bullet smashed into the gun mount. The impact threw him down into the Stryker, but he climbed back up and completed reloading, receiving additional wounds to his hands. Enemy fighters began to encircle the sniper team on the hill, their shots getting closer. Sergeant Brantley called a Stryker to his position to gun down insurgents advancing on his right flank.⁴⁹ The enemy's proximity to the Stryker surprised Colunga, firing from the hatch of Montez's Stryker. "I looked at [one of our] snipers," said Colunga, "he was shooting really close to us."⁵⁰ Osborne was standing in his hatch and could hear the snap of bullets overhead when his vehicle commander shouted, "Hey, get down!" and pulled him into the Stryker.⁵¹

Even though Osborne had a mortar Stryker in his element, he did not possess the authority to use it as the coordinates he relayed to the crew

were too close to structures, which might contain civilians.⁵² “We were getting attacked on three sides at that point,” Osborne explained.⁵³ He requested air support but none was available due to enemy action in Bravo Company’s AO.⁵⁴

While Osborne slugged it out with the enemy in Buyana, Captain Pope, more than forty kilometers to the south in the Arghandab, prepared Bravo Company to conduct another reconnaissance after the previous night’s failure. “If we want to find the enemy,” Pope reasoned, “let’s just start where we had enemy contact the first time.”⁵⁵ Pope’s company had been bolstered by the addition of Alpha Company’s 3d Platoon, led by First Lieutenant Brian Zangenberg. Pope sent Zangenberg’s platoon and Berschinski’s 2d Platoon to patrol up north while Bravo Company’s 1st and 3d platoons rehearsed their security plan for polling sites with the ANA and ANP in the town of Jelawur.⁵⁶

Zangenberg and Berschinski developed their plan together. Zangenberg would leave COP Jelawur first and head north through the desert paralleling Route RED DOG to avoid IEDs. Just south of the town of Babur, Zangenberg’s men would dismount, cross RED DOG to the east, and head into the orchards. Once in the orchards they would turn north and head into Babur. Berschinski would leave a half hour after Zangenberg, follow his same route, pass Zangenberg’s dismount point, and then dismount near Shuyen-e Sofla, where he would head east into the orchards, then south to link up with Zangenberg. Once the two lieutenants linked up, they would lead their platoons back to their Strykers. The entire mission was planned to take about three hours.⁵⁷

At 1500, while Osborne was under fire in Buyana, Pope’s two platoons headed north, paralleling RED DOG. Zangenberg’s men dismounted at their designated location and moved into the orchards while a few men stayed behind to maintain security and overwatch the orchards. The men in the orchard soon turned north and crossed into the town of Babur. They advanced through the maze of buildings and walls until they reached more orchards to the north. Sergeant Troy Tom then walked point across a small, concrete footbridge. He had just crossed the bridge when an IED exploded. Tom was killed instantly as the enemy opened fire from the south, behind Zangenberg’s platoon. Those not knocked down by the blast took a knee. Fortunately, the men were walking 10 meters apart, spaced far enough so that not everyone was affected. “The spacing is what saved us,” explained Specialist Guillermo Garcia.⁵⁸

The enemy fired five unaimed rifle shots near the Strykers. The men guarding the Strykers returned fire. Sergeant First Class Rande Henderson

popped off ten rounds while Staff Sergeant Justin Prince, the company's fire support NCO, laid down and fired his rifle. The enemy fire ceased. At the explosion site, everyone did a head count but Tom did not respond. Sergeant First Class Bobby Ciman rushed to Tom's location with two medics, but he was nowhere to be found. Zangenberg called Pope, "We've encountered one IED," Zangenberg reported, "one possible casualty."⁵⁹ The men began searching the area and walking the canal looking for Tom. They only found ID tags and parts of his equipment.⁶⁰

Meanwhile, First Lieutenant Berschinski's men had just dismounted their Strykers, passed through an empty Shuyen-e Sofla and were moving toward an orchard when they heard the IED explosion to the south, followed by small-arms fire. They saw the plume of smoke. Berschinski ordered his men to halt and listened to his radio as Zangenberg called in his report. Realizing that Zangenberg was in trouble, Berschinski called for his men to move back through the town. When he heard civilians cheering in the distance, he knew the situation was bad. He needed to get to Zangenberg quickly, so he called for his Strykers to move south as he moved dismounted south. He saw Zangenberg's position on his Land Warrior map, but the image kept popping in and out intermittently. When he saw a trail on his paper map leading through the orchards to where he thought Zangenberg was, he directed his Soldiers to a footbridge. As one squad secured the far side of the bridge, Berschinski crossed with his RTO, Specialist Roger Garcia. Private First Class Jonathan Yanney was crossing behind the two men when an IED exploded on the near side of the bridge.⁶¹

The powerful blast knocked everyone to the ground, blinding them with dust. An enemy fighter in front of the platoon engaged the lead soldiers, and those who could, returned fire. Berschinski crawled forward, sweeping his hands in front of him until he found Garcia, who was lying on his back. He checked Garcia for blood but found none. As the dust started to clear, Berschinski pulled his face up to Garcia's to tell him he was okay, but Garcia just yelled, oblivious to his lieutenant. The blast had deafened him. The men up front shouted back that they had engaged the enemy fighter and he had broken contact. Berschinski ordered his men to cease firing and began a head count. Like Tom minutes before, Yanney did not respond when his name was called. Shredded bits of Yanney's map fluttered down from the sky. The men looked up and saw twisted fragments of his radio antennae caught in the tree branches. The explosion gouged a two-foot deep crater where Yanney had been walking. With Yanney unaccounted for, Berschinski's platoon shifted its mission from reinforcing Zangenberg's men to searching for Yanney.⁶²

Berschinski pulled all his men back to the western side of the canal and set up a security perimeter. He then called Captain Pope but did not know how to explain the situation. “We just took an IED,” he reported. “Yanney is missing but I’m pretty sure he’s KIA [killed in action].” Berschinski had never before called in a missing person, known as a Duty Status Whereabouts Unknown (DUSTWUN), and did not want to broadcast what had happened. “I knew that everyone was listening over the radio.”⁶³

While Bravo company dealt with its casualties, First Lieutenant Osborne continued his fight outside Buyana. With so much enemy fire coming into his position and unable to use his mortars, Osborne decided to break contact. His snipers bounded to the Strykers under fire. Once onboard, the vehicles roared out of the area. Insurgents followed on foot, continuing to fire. When the M240 machine gun on one Stryker ran out of ammunition, a Soldier popped out of the hatch and fired his M-203 grenade launcher. He hit an insurgent in the leg, but a motorcycle with a bin on the back quickly carted the wounded man away, using a *wadi* as an escape route. As the Strykers departed, the insurgents on the roofs of buildings celebrated, firing their rifles into the air.⁶⁴

Osborne’s four Strykers drove 1,000 meters into the desert and stopped to form a 360-degree security perimeter. Each Stryker faced out in a different direction with its rear ramp lowered so the Soldiers inside could communicate directly with others in their vehicles. The men reloaded their weapons and were preparing to reengage when their company commander, Captain John Hallett, drove up with the 1st Platoon, led by First Lieutenant Seth Wilkin, as the company QRF. The ANA and ANP had also returned. When Hallett had passed the ANP headquarters on the way to Buyana, he had picked them up. Hallett asked for a situation report and then directed his two platoons to mount an attack back into Buyana. A force of ten Strykers now charged forward in a line, surprising the Taliban who thought the Americans had retreated for good. As the company pushed forward, one of Wilkin’s Strykers hit a large rock and broke an axle.⁶⁵

The Strykers formed a Vee formation as they rolled up on a corner of the village. One insurgent fired an RPG that flew 10 feet over one Stryker while another insurgent fired an RPG from a building doorway, which streaked between two other vehicles. The crews immediately returned fire with machine guns and Mk 19 grenade launchers, setting the building on fire. Enemy rounds pinged off the Strykers. Some of the men dismounted their vehicles and engaged the insurgents, who were firing RPGs and machine guns while retreating northwest through the town. First Sergeant Eugene Hicks could see the enemy moving from building to building

and escaping into a wooded area. He wanted to enter the buildings but Hallett refused, preferring that the Afghan Security Forces be used for this purpose.⁶⁶ Hicks dismounted his vehicle anyway and closed on a building where the enemy fired RPGs. From a distance of only 15 feet, Hicks opened fire on four men. “I think I hit one guy twice,” explained Hicks, “but he was just kind of lurching forward. He wasn’t going to stop.”⁶⁷

Hallett learned that Kiowa helicopters were inbound. When they arrived Osborne fired tracer rounds from his rifle to point out enemy locations. When the insurgents saw the helicopters, they retreated along a *wadi*. The men later found a number of blood trails but no bodies. The firefight was over, but because the Soldiers had to recover two damaged vehicles, it took the company until 2200 to return to FOB Frontenac.⁶⁸ The men were pleased with their first performance against the enemy but wondered why it took so long to get helicopter support. They found out when Captain Hallett explained what happened to Tom and Yanney in the Arghandab Valley. “Everybody was pretty much on cloud nine,” recalled Staff Sergeant Forbes, “[but] that kind of ruined the elation real quick.”⁶⁹

Dealing with Two DUSTWUNS in the Arghandab

In the Arghandab, Captain Pope was rehearsing election security at COP Jelawur when he first learned about Tom and Yanney. Pope called First Lieutenant Boirum, whose 3d Platoon was his QRF, and told him to go to Readiness Condition-1 (REDCON-1), meaning his platoon needed to be alert, mounted in their vehicles with their weapons loaded. Pope then loaded the few men with him into a Stryker and an MRAP and headed north to First Lieutenant Berschinski and First Lieutenant Zangenberg’s positions.⁷⁰

At the battalion headquarters, Neumann monitored the situations with both Alpha and Bravo Companies. He was concerned that the enemy had captured Yanney. When Boirum’s men reported finding some IV bags and bloody bandages in a house, Neumann thought the enemy had given Yanney first aid. “No,” Boirum radioed, “there’s zero chance that that happened.”⁷¹ Boirum had seen the blast site, Yanney’s destroyed equipment and a few of his human remains. He knew what had happened to his Soldier. With the dense vegetation making communications difficult, Neumann was not clear on exactly what had happened to Yanney. When Pope reported that he could not account for all his men, Neumann made up his mind. “That was the trigger,” he explained.⁷² Leaving Major Darren Jennings, the battalion’s executive officer, to manage Alpha Company’s situation, he took his three Strykers that made up his TAC, including Major O’Connor and the battalion scouts, to Pope’s position.⁷³

Boirum was ready for Pope's call. He had heard the first IED explode some four kilometers away while he was leading a foot patrol through Jelawur, with his Strykers paralleling him outside the town. He immediately had his men go to REDCON-1. As the men climbed into the Strykers and loaded their weapons, the second IED went off and Pope's order came in. Boirum raced to Berschinski's position and found it in trouble. "The platoon was in a state of shock," recalled Boirum. "First Lieutenant Berschinski was heavily concussed."⁷⁴ Boirum got Berschinski to sit down and ordered Berschinski's men to establish security while his men helped search for Yanney in the adjacent buildings. Men kicked in doors and searched rooftops. Others walked shoulder-to-shoulder through the orchards. Boirum and Staff Sergeant Joshua Meyers climbed into the canal and walked upstream with their fingers probing the bottom. The men found only Yanney's empty boot, a twisted M4 rifle grip and some body parts. Medics arrived and evacuated the deaf Specialist Garcia and Sergeant Kevin Deas, who had taken shrapnel in his bicep.⁷⁵

With First Lieutenant Berschinski not wanting everyone to know what happened to Yanney, Staff Sergeant Justin Prince, the fire support NCO, called in two DUSTWUNs using the fires net, which put him in direct contact with the battalion headquarters with fewer Soldiers listening in. DUSTWUN calls usually meant the enemy had captured a soldier and triggered a lockdown to seal off the area until that Soldier could be found. Colonel Tunnell, the brigade commander, passed the *Buffaloes* as many assets as possible to find Tom and Yanney. A US Special Operation Force (SOF) element was sent to the area along with fixed- and rotary-wing aircraft and unmanned aerial vehicles to search for the two men. The brigade reserve moved to Pope's location to block the area from the south, while Captain Joel Kassulke's Charlie Company, on the eastern side of the Arghandab River, set up blocking positions along various checkpoints, inspecting vehicles at entry control points along Route BEAR.⁷⁶ At a bridge between Bravo and Charlie companies, one of Kassulke's squads set up a second checkpoint across from one of Pope's. "Everybody got checked by them," recalled Corporal Chad Cannon of Charlie Company, "and then checked again by us."⁷⁷

While Boirum and Berschinski continued their searches, Captain Pope arrived on Route RED DOG near sundown and requested an escort into First Lieutenant Zangenberg's position. Through a miscommunication, Boirum and Berschinski thought Pope wanted them to stop their search for Yanney and assist with the search for Tom. Both platoons departed the area, mounted their Strykers and drove to Pope's position. The large escort

surprised Pope but he could not send them back. “Night’s falling and I need to get into defensive positions,” he later explained.⁷⁸ From there they escorted the captain to Zangenberg’s location, getting lost along the way, adding to everyone’s frustration.

A Dangerous Night at Babur

By the time Pope’s platoons accomplished their link up, all the officers and men of Bravo Company were exhausted and frustrated. Some were in shock from the day’s events. First Lieutenant Zangenberg reported that his men had cleared all the compounds in his area so Pope assigned each platoon a specific compound to bed down for the night. After letting the men consolidate the compounds, Pope called a huddle with his key leaders. The lieutenants and a few NCOs met on the roof of Pope’s building. “I was running ragged,” Pope later confessed.⁷⁹ He was supposed to be preparing for an election and running patrols, but instead he was leading a DUSTWUN recovery operation. He reviewed the situation and told the officers that they would resume the search for Tom at daylight, and then search for Yanney.⁸⁰

The meeting broke up around midnight and the men returned to their compounds. First Lieutenant Berschinski walked with Specialist Nick Torres back to his platoon’s compound. As they neared it, Berschinski called to the men guarding the walls of the compound, “Friendly coming in!” Just then, an IED detonated.⁸¹ The blast threw him into the air, destroying his legs, lacerating his left arm, and breaking his jaw. He bounced off a wall and landed head first into the crater. “Guys, guys, I need your help,” he called out as Soldiers raced to him. “I hit a bomb, I don’t have any legs.”⁸² Three medics applied tourniquets, inserted an IV and wrapped hemostatic control (HemCon) bandages on his legs to stop the hemorrhaging. Captain Pope arrived and slapped Berschinski’s face to try to keep him conscious and reminded him of his parents. Berschinski cursed in response. Pope then told him “Stay with me. The birds are going to be here.”⁸³

Staff Sergeant Prince had radioed for a MEDEVAC and was told it was five minutes out, then ten minutes, then five minutes away. When an on-station Kiowa helicopter offered to MEDEVAC Berschinski, Prince called a circling US Air Force AC-130 Gunship to clear a helicopter landing zone. Using its 25mm Gatling gun and 40mm auto cannon, the gunship blasted an area of 400 meters in only two minutes. The Kiowa then landed and the co-pilot got out. The men tried to cram Berschinski into the seat, but realized he might bleed to death before reaching a hospital. As they debated what to do next, a US Air Force Para-Rescue Jumper HH-160 Black Hawk helicopter pilot radioed that he was two minutes out. The

helicopter landed quickly, took Berschinski on board, and flew him to a hospital in Kandahar city. The men on the ground had waited almost an hour for Berschinski's evacuation.⁸⁴

Berschinski survived. He credited his survival to hitting the wall and falling into the crater, where he could be easily found. "The medics did an incredible job," he said. "The guy who pretty much everyone credits with keeping me alive is [medic] David Luketti."⁸⁵ Just as the Black Hawk departed, Lieutenant Colonel Neumann's TAC reached Pope's Strykers but could not raise the company commander on the radio. Neumann had been delayed when his small convoy passed a vehicle with a body in the trunk and stopped to inspect it only to discover it was a local Afghan, not one of his men. Upon Neumann's arrival he climbed into one of Pope's Strykers and used its radio. He then learned for the first time that both Tom and Yanney were officially DUSTWUNs.⁸⁶

Neumann went to work. He realized that the platoon sergeant in charge of Bravo Company's Strykers had not moved his Strykers, something that invited an enemy attack. The sergeant had also done little to maintain security or communications with other Strykers and small units. Neumann ordered Master Sergeant Mark Hamil, the battalion's operations sergeant major, to take charge. Hamil organized the company's ten Strykers into a cohesive defensive position and reestablished communications. Neumann then conferred with Pope and ordered him to consolidate and reorganize his company to allow both Bravo and all the *Buffaloes* to better set the conditions for the search come sunrise. With Major O'Connor, Neumann coordinated with the rest of the battalion, as well as the brigade and other units assisting in the DUSTWUN.⁸⁷

Activity dominated the night. Helicopters roamed the skies, searching for the two missing Soldiers. Enemy radio chatter revealed an imminent attack, so the Soldiers divided up the ammunition and prepared a counterattack. "If they're coming," thought Specialist Guillermo Garcia, "it's going to be a good fight."⁸⁸ But the attack never came. When aerial assets spotted a man with a weapon conferring with a group of men near a van, Pope obtained permission to drop a bomb on their position, with unexpected results, "There were huge secondary explosions off in the distance," he said.⁸⁹ The men were obviously working with IEDs. Before sunrise, the troops heard movement outside their position and an occasional clanging of a bell. They fired at the sounds, which turned out to be a donkey. The braying animal fell over into a canal.⁹⁰

Continuing the Search

The next morning Captain Pope continued the search for his two missing Soldiers. Around 1000 the men found Sergeant Tom's body in the canal, close to where they had searched the day before. They put a stretcher underneath him, lifted him out of the water and brought him to a nearby compound to account for his gear and remove any sensitive items. The men called for a helicopter but none was available. Because Tom was a DUSTWUN, with so many resources committed, Lieutenant Colonel Neumann needed to personally verify the body. The exhausted men carried Tom through grape rows, a swamp, and a canal. On the way out, Staff Sergeant Prince spotted two insurgents holding weapons in the distance and called in two Kiowa Warrior helicopters, which swooped in and fired, not only killing the men but also setting off a weapons cache. "There were five minutes' [worth] of secondary explosions," said Prince.⁹¹ Once Neumann positively identified Tom's body, a helicopter arrived. Neumann then patted Pope on the back, told him he did a good job and ordered his platoon back to Alpha Company at FOB Frontenac. Neumann would substitute another Alpha Company platoon, First Lieutenant Osborne's 2d Platoon, for 3d Platoon during the election.⁹²

With Tom found, Pope could now concentrate his search for Private First Class Yanney. He knew the enemy had likely prepared for this movement. "Past success equals future performance for the enemy," Pope later explained.⁹³ The search became a battalion operation with Bravo Company designated as the main effort. Neumann gave Pope an engineer platoon to breach the IED belt located on the edges of the orchards that made up the borders of the green zone. Also joining Pope were his 1st Platoon under First Lieutenant Ryan Fadden and his Mobile Gun System Platoon under First Lieutenant Fiorenzo Iaconangelo. While enough had been found to confirm Yanney as KIA, the officers wanted the rest of his body. "We owed it to both him and his family to get back to the blast site and see if there was anything else to recover," Neumann later explained.⁹⁴

The MGS platoon provided overwatch as the attack began. They loaded with an anti-personnel canister round to penetrate the dense orchards. The engineers led the way into the Green Zone, breaching the IED belt. They were followed by the MGS, 2d and 1st platoons, all mounted in their Strykers. The engineers combed the grape fields and pomegranate orchards for an hour until their platoon leader reported to Pope that the area was clear. Then the engineer lieutenant reported two armed males in the area and Pope ordered, "Engage, engage!"⁹⁵

As the engineers took the enemy under fire, multiple vehicles pushed into the orchards. An MGS Stryker rolled forward and was engaged by a command-detonated IED. The explosion rocked the vehicle, injuring its driver, immobilizing the vehicle and knocking out its electrical power. Inside the MGS, Sergeant First Class Edward Weig ordered his gunner to return fire with manual controls, then extracted the driver from his seat and pulled him atop the vehicle. An engineer Stryker vehicle pulled up next to the MGS and the engineers pulled the crew onto their vehicle. When the enemy opened fire at the two crews, Weig climbed back inside, traversed the MGS's turret, and fired a cannister round at the enemy. The powerful blast peeled back the trees. "There was nothing of the enemy left," said Staff Sergeant Prince, the fire support NCO.⁹⁶

With enemy fire suppressed, Pope ordered the remnants of First Lieutenant Berschinski's 2d Platoon forward, since they knew where Yanney had been. As the unit advanced, concealed insurgents engaged the men with machine guns and AK-47s. The enemy ran behind buildings, tree lines and walls. "They were everywhere," explained Prince.⁹⁷ While the Americans returned suppressive fire, Prince jumped into Sergeant First Class Tony Dimico's Stryker and said he needed to get as close to the engagement as possible to call in fire support. Dimico drove forward, at times coming under enemy fire. Prince climbed on top of the Stryker and called in gun runs by Kiowa Warrior helicopters, which shot up a tree line and targeted two- and three-man enemy teams who were trying to converge on Pope's company. When the helicopters' gun runs failed to take out an enemy bunker, Prince backed the men 25 meters away and used a Predator drone to fire a Hellfire missile, which destroyed it.⁹⁸

Prince spent most of the battle standing atop Dimico's Stryker, calling in helicopters and only ducking down when enemy fire got too close. He would then immediately return fire and stand back up to resume his duties. "Rounds were bouncing off the Stryker right bedside us and hitting the dirt right beside us, [and] passing over our heads," he later explained.⁹⁹ His work with the aerial assets impressed First Lieutenant Fadden: "He did a pretty incredible job of calling in air support," said Fadden. "He probably had about five or six different layers of air assets stacked on top of each other."¹⁰⁰ First Lieutenant Boirum succinctly summed up the engagement, "The enemy took a lot of casualties."¹⁰¹

During the engagement, Lieutenant Colonel Neumann and his TAC monitored the situation from right behind the engineers' breach point, while simultaneously overseeing the other companies, scouts, mortars and air assets. When the enemy fired at the TAC Strykers, they returned fire and

conducted survivability drills, so as to prevent a full-on engagement while coordinating the various assets. Neumann's staff relayed target information to Bravo Company's security elements on the friendly side of the breach, allowing them to engage the enemy while Neumann concentrated on the larger fight.¹⁰²

When the engagement ended, Bravo Company established a foothold where Yanney had been. The engineers swept with mine detectors while others resumed the search. One enemy fighter continuously fired rounds from across the canal. The search was slow and deliberate but the sun was setting and the election was the next day. Pope reported to Lieutenant Colonel Neumann that they had found body parts of and bits of Yanney's equipment. * Neumann in turn reported to Colonel Tunnell, who called off the DUSTWUN. Neumann continued the search, not wanting to stop until he could really verify for himself that Yanney was dead.

Finally, Neumann realized his men were not going to find anything more of Yanney, and not wanting to risk any more casualties in a night defense, he recommended to Colonel Tunnell that the search be called off. The brigade commander concurred. "That was a tough call," Neumann later admitted, "because we live by the ethos that [we] never leave a fallen comrade."¹⁰³ For two years the unit had ended every battalion formation by reciting the Soldiers' Creed, which included the line: "I will never leave a fallen comrade," but in the violent underbrush of the Green Zone, Neumann knew his men could not recover every bit of their fallen brother.¹⁰⁴ Major Jennings defended Neumann's decision. "We would have lost more people if Colonel Neumann hadn't made the recommendation to pull out."¹⁰⁵ In the darkness, Pope's men departed the orchard, remounted their Strykers, and raced back to COP Jelawur. They had only a few hours until the polls opened.¹⁰⁶

* A month later at a border crossing into Pakistan, Afghan National Police stopped a man with confiscated photocopied documents that had been in Yanney's wallet.

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Chapter 3

The Election and Beyond

Before sunrise on 20 August, Neumann's companies fanned out to secure the polling places. At COP Jelawur, Lieutenant Osborne of 2d Platoon, Alpha Company, greeted Captain Pope. Osborne, fresh from his engagement at Buyana, was unfamiliar with the Arghandab. Pope briefed the platoon leaders on the numerous polling sites along Route RED DOG and one in a schoolhouse deep in the Green Zone. He assigned Osborne the schoolhouse. After Pope left, Lieutenant Boirum briefed Osborne again in more detail, advising him to stay off the roads. With little sleep, the men headed out on their new mission.¹

Osborne's Strykers dropped his platoon close to the Green Zone and the men trekked two kilometers, through irrigation ditches and orchards, and over seven-foot-high walls to reach the schoolhouse. The Soldiers were weighed down with equipment and a lot of water, since they would be without resupply for the entire day. "It was probably one of the hardest movements that I've done," recalled Sergeant First Class Faver.² Once at the schoolhouse, Osborne saw enemy mortar rounds exploding on the district center in Charlie Company's AO. He located the mortar firing position and called in Kiowa helicopters, which dropped smoke on the site and then hit it with rockets. The pilots reported four enemy killed. Later in the day, after only three people had showed up to vote, the ANA commander told Osborne he wanted to shut down the polls early. Osborne argued with the commander until he learned why: officials inside the schoolhouse were stuffing the ballot box. Osborne and the commander stopped the illegal action and closed the site.³

Once Osborne's election duties were over, his 2d Platoon pulled out of the schoolhouse and returned to their Strykers. On their way back to COP Jelawur, his men noticed that people were staying off the roads. The Strykers reached a choke point between an ANA compound and some houses with little room to maneuver. The first vehicle rolled through without incident but the second vehicle, holding Staff Sergeant Montez and seven other Soldiers, detonated an IED. The explosion violently rocked the Stryker and blew one of its front left tires into the air. "I remember screaming and smoke and being hit," recalled Sergeant Pedro Colunga, who was temporarily blinded by the blast.⁴ With communications out, Montez assessed everyone's condition, then climbed out of the commander's hatch and gave the thumbs-up to men in the other Strykers. No one had been killed but Colunga was wounded and shrapnel had lacerated Montez's face. Both men also suffered concussions.⁵

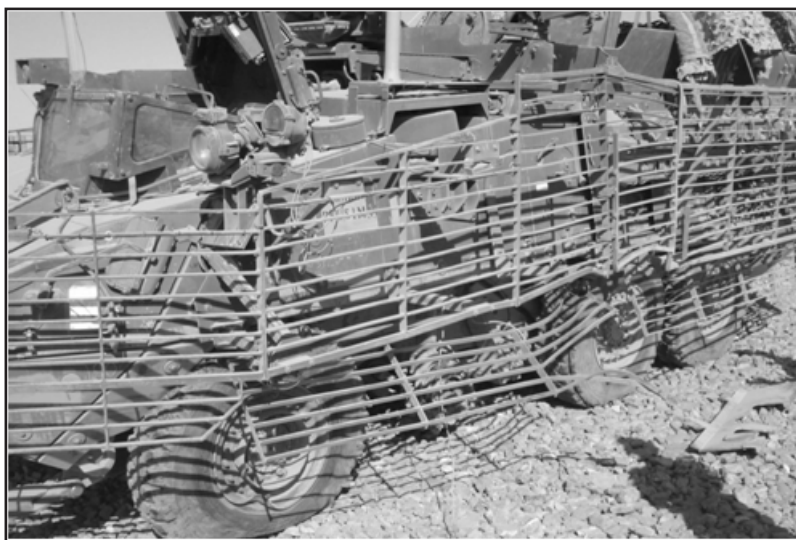


Figure 10. Staff Sergeant Robert Montez's Stryker after its left tire was blown off by an IED.

Courtesy Captain Zac Osborne, US Army

Elsewhere in Bravo Company's AO, the election ran smoothly. Lieutenant Ryan Fadden spent a relatively quiet day at a polling station along Route RED DOG. As he returned to Jelawur, however, an IED exploded underneath his Stryker. The bright orange explosion knocked Fadden down into the vehicle and broke his driver's ankle. Sergeant James Knowler had dozed off in the back of the Stryker when the IED detonated. "I woke up to what seemed like a million pounds of sand in my mouth," he recalled.⁶ Specialist Wesley Pfreil immediately fired the Mk 19 grenade launcher at the two triggermen and killed them.⁷

Up in the Shah Wali Kot District, Captain Hallett personally delivered ballots to his remaining two Alpha Company platoons securing numerous polling sites. One site came under a brief mortar attack, but no one was hurt.⁸ The next morning, Lieutenant Zangenburg's platoon and some ANA soldiers were sleeping on the roof of the Shah Wali Kot District Center when the enemy opened fire with RPGs and AK-47s. Some of the RPG rockets landed within 20 meters of the platoon's parked Strykers below. The men on the roof returned fire for approximately 10 minutes. When the firing stopped, Zangenburg found an RPG tail fin embedded in one of his Strykers.⁹

At battalion headquarters, the staff monitored updates, ready to send reinforcements to any site in the AO. Lieutenant Colonel Neumann's most important decision that day was not committing to any engagements and letting the Afghan Security Forces follow the plan of securing the polling sites. "We intended to stay ready to react," Neumann later said, "but basically stay out of sight."¹⁰

Throughout these actions, the *Buffalos* had done their best to provide a secure election process. Yet they could not make people show up to vote, only ensure their safety once they got to a polling site. Voter turnout in Kandahar Province was estimated at between one and five percent. Only men voted. "I don't think in our area, a single woman approached any of the polls," said Neumann.¹¹ Only a few people showed up to vote in the Bravo Company's sector. They had either been chased away or intimidated by the Taliban. Across Afghanistan, only half as many people voted as had in the 2004 elections. President Karzai won reelection but there were numerous accusations of fraud. Ahmed Rashid, a specialist on Afghan affairs, later criticized the legitimacy of the election, contending that, "The fraud and ballot stuffing by Karzai's supporters was on an epic scale."¹²

Ambush in Jeleran

With the election over, the *Buffalos* continued to establish themselves in their AO. Lieutenant Colonel Neumann decided to extend BUFFALO STAMPEDE a few days to continue gathering information on the area.

Captain Kassulke's Charlie Company patrolled around the Arghandab District Center, looking for potential future outpost locations.¹³ On 25 August, with temperatures hovering around 120 degrees, Lieutenant Joshua Bobbitt's 3d Platoon patrolled the southern end of the town of Jeleran, southwest of the District Center. After the Strykers dropped the men off on the northern side of a pomegranate orchard, the Soldiers headed south along a trail until reaching a corner where the trail led west. Open fields faced them to the south and east. A tree line bordered the eastern field, while a brick wall, running east to west, bordered the southern field. Two berms, one to the east and one near the bend in the trail, were the only terrain features on otherwise flat open spaces. To the west ran a north-to-south wall, protecting several compounds. The men had just turned west on the trail when insurgents opened fire with rifles and machine guns from behind the southern wall. The Americans dove for cover and returned fire.

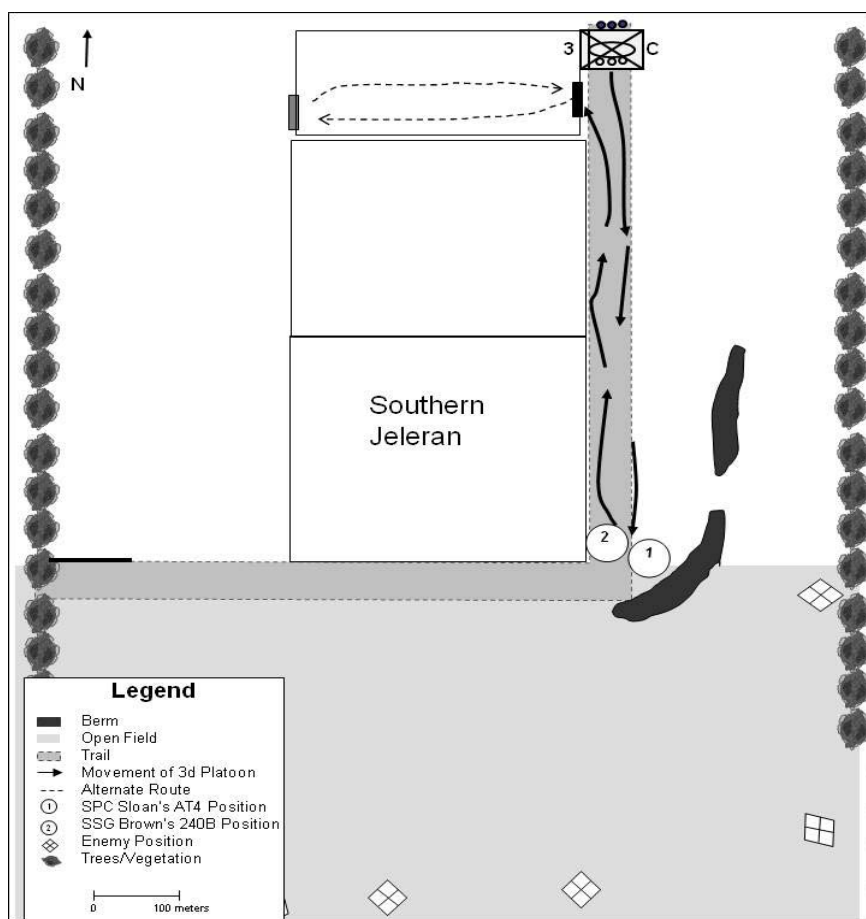


Figure 11. 3d Platoon, Charlie Company fights an ambush.

Source: author/CSI generated

Bobbitt ordered his 3d Squad forward to establish a base of fire and deployed the rest of his men to gain fire superiority. Sergeant First Class Andrew Munch, the platoon sergeant, bounded forward with a fire team and a machinegun team. The fire team consisted of Staff Sergeant Kenneth Weiss, Sergeant Joe Griffin, SAW gunner Specialist Tyler Walshe, and rifleman Specialist Brandon Sloan while the gun team consisted of Sergeant Jarrett Brown and Private First Class Thomas Hill, the 240B machine gunner. The two teams headed to the eastern berm, laying down covering fire as they went. Along the way, heat exhaustion overwhelmed Specialist Hill. Sergeant Brown grabbed Hill's 240B and fired at the enemy while

carrying the fatigued Hill forward. “He was basically dragging [Hill] with him and shooting at the same time,” recalled Staff Sergeant Nikola Tersiev.¹⁴ Once at the berm, the two teams focused their fire at the muzzle flashes across the 200-meter field, while Hill fired Brown’s M4. The berm offered little protection. “[Brown’s] gun team was probably the most exposed,” recalled Weiss, “just because they were on that little mound.”¹⁵

As the two sides exchanged fire, Specialist Sloan aimed an AT-4 rocket at a PKM machine gun firing from across the field. He pressed the trigger but the weapon did not fire as he had forgotten to pull the safety pin. Sergeant Weiss reached over and pulled it out for him and then checked to make sure the back blast area was clear. While Weiss put his hands over his ears, Sloan pushed the trigger again. This time the round blasted out of the tube and exploded on the PKM position, killing its crew.¹⁶

Bobbitt tried to call for air support and artillery but the dense orchard interfered with communications. As the enemy fired from three sides—west, south, and east—Bobbitt realized he had few options for maneuver, “unless we wanted to just run straight at them through a 200-meter bound in an open field,” he later explained, which would only result in American casualties.¹⁷ After 20 minutes of intense fighting, Bobbitt made a tough decision. He ran over to his squad leaders and told each of them, “Hey, we’ve got to break contact.”¹⁸

While Munch, Brown, and Hill remained at the berm providing suppressive fire, the fire team and the rest of the platoon headed back north. Weiss and Bobbitt were discussing the situation when enemy rounds smacked into some nearby pomegranate trees, showering both men with tree bark. They looked at each other and dropped to one knee. “Wow! That’s pretty close,” said Weiss.¹⁹ The men continued to move back until they found a metal door in the western wall. They hoped it might lead them to a better position. “We just broke it and went through into a compound,” recalled Tersiev.²⁰ As the men passed through the compound, they noticed a woman holding a baby, oblivious to the fighting around her. From this surreal scene, the men passed through another door on the opposite side of the compound and headed south to a wall but there was no alternate exit from the battlefield so the men returned to the path.

With the platoon pulling out, Sergeant Weiss ran back to retrieve the gun team. Fortunately, there was a lull in the fighting. “Hey, we gotta go!” he told Munch, Brown, and Hill.²¹ The men were so exhausted that he had to help them to their feet. Seeing their withdrawal, the enemy opened fire but the men quickly returned suppressive fire and were able to successfully rejoin the platoon.

The platoon then headed north through pomegranate orchards until Bobbitt ordered a security halt. The men took a knee and faced out. Some drank water while others just caught their breath or used the break to develop the situation. “To use Ranger school doctrine,” explained Bobbitt, “it was a place to conduct SLLS (Stop, Look, Listen and Smell).”²² A Kiowa helicopter arrived on station and Bobbitt contacted the pilot. During the initial contact, when Bobbitt could not raise anyone on his radio, the Stryker crews that had dropped off his platoon received his signals and relayed them to Captain Kassulke who had requested the air support. Sergeant First Class Munch now popped smoke to signal the platoon’s position to the helicopter. The halt over, the men stood up and resumed their march to the road leading back to the district center. As the platoon moved north in a staggered formation, a single shot rang out from the west followed by small arms fire from a tree line. “[I] could actually see at least five or ten muzzle blasts about five seconds after that first round,” said Tersiev.²³ Bobbitt maneuvered his men to a piece of high ground some 300 meters above the enemy position and opened fire. He then contacted the Kiowa helicopter which made two gun runs on the enemy position. “It felt like [it] was right on top of us,” recalled Bobbitt, “it was close.”²⁴ The Kiowa’s gun runs, combined with the platoon’s fire, neutralized the enemy squad-sized force. By the time the platoon returned to the district center, many of the men needed IVs to replenish their fluids.²⁵

While there were no confirmed kills, Sergeant First Class Munch believed Private First Class Sloane’s AT-4 shot killed between three and five insurgents, while the second ambush resulted in at least nine killed or mortally wounded. The enemy removed their dead and wounded from the battlefield before the platoon could conduct any battle damage assessment. Throughout the day’s action, Lieutenant Bobbitt felt his men performed well—immediately finding cover, returning fire, and listening to their leaders. “They did what was expected of them and instinctively reacted from what they learned in training.”²⁶

Bobbitt also learned an important lesson. Prior to the engagement, the ANP had stressed to him that orchards were the equivalent to an American’s backyard. Trying to be culturally sensitive, he kept his men on trails, which allowed the enemy to track his platoon’s movements and establish an ambush position. Afterwards, Bobbitt always moved through orchards. “After that firefight I made the decision that I would never sacrifice my platoon down a trail and we would always go through the orchards when patrolling.”²⁷

Deadly IED in Shah Wali Kot

While Bobbitt's platoon fought in the Arghandab that day of 25 August, Lieutenant Colonel Neumann decided to send Captain Hallett's Alpha Company south to the Arghandab Valley and replace it in the Shah Wali Kot with Captain Glonek's Hatchet Company. When Glonek met with Hallett to review the relief in place, Hallett told him he was on his way there to check out a reported cholera outbreak and invited him along to see the route. Eight Strykers and an MRAP rolled out of FOB Frontenac, headed for the Shah Wali Kot District Center. Included in Hallett's Stryker were the battalion's Physician Assistant (PA), Captain Cory Jenkins, and Sergeant First Class Ronald Sawyer as medic. Along the way, the convoy crossed over several culverts beneath the road. Denial systems—metal grates—were in place on many of the culverts to prevent the enemy from placing bombs underneath the road, but Glonek, riding in the MRAP, did not notice any on this part of the route. "Do you see any denial systems on any of the culverts?" Glonek asked his gunner, who said he did not.²⁸ Glonek thought it odd but knew that Alpha Company had been using the route for a couple of weeks.

At the district center, the Americans toured the local medical facility, where doctors and staff explained the outbreak and how their own government had not provided them any needed medication. Hallett knew he was not supposed to give the locals any medical supplies, but when he saw the staff's desperation, he told his medics, "go out and get that medication."²⁹ When they brought him the supplies, he turned it all over to the staff telling them, "We're not just here to give you a few promises, we really want to help out."³⁰

With the situation assessed and aid provided, the Americans loaded onto their Strykers and departed the facility. The convoy split into two elements for the drive back, each with five vehicles. The first element included Captain Glonek in the second vehicle and Hallett in the third. Their column had driven approximately five kilometers south from the district center when an IED detonated under Hallett's Stryker. The powerful blast threw the rear of the Stryker into the air, completely flipping the vehicle. "It was a massive hit," explained Glonek, who watched the explosion from his MRAP's side-view mirror.³¹ The column halted and Glonek established a security perimeter while several soldiers ran to the overturned Stryker which had started to burn.

First Sergeant Eugene Hicks jumped out of his vehicle and raced to Hallett's Stryker calling, "Get a stretcher! Get extinguishers!"³² Hicks

entered the rear of the burning Stryker and pulled out the company's Afghan interpreter, who seemed unharmed. He then saw a Soldier named Pannell climbing towards him, so he grabbed him by his vest and pulled him out. Hicks could see that Captain Jenkins, the PA, was dead, hanging upside down in his seatbelt, so he called for Captain Hallett but got no response. Fire started to spread within the vehicle. Staff Sergeant Jorge Banuelos joined Hicks and the two men crawled into the Stryker, trying to cut Sergeant First Class Sawyer out of his seat. Just then ammunition began cooking off inside the vehicle. Hicks ordered everyone out. Killed inside were Captains Hallett and Jenkins, along with Sawyer, and the Stryker's driver, Private First Class Dennis Williams. Pannell and the interpreter survived but were seriously injured.³³

As flames engulfed the Stryker, Glonek called for a MEDEVAC and requested fire extinguishers with the QRF. First Sergeant Hicks spotted the suspected triggerman hiding behind a rock hut. An Apache helicopter arrived on station and Hicks called the TOC and received an order to fire. The pilot fired a missile at the hut, destroying it and killing the triggerman. The men then cleared a helicopter landing zone (HLZ) and a MEDEVAC flew out the wounded.³⁴

When Lieutenant Colonel Neumann arrived on the scene with the QRF, Glonek took him aside and told him who was in the Stryker. "I was just looking at this Stryker that's just absolutely one big ball of flames," recalled Neumann, "and then it registered to me what a terrible situation it was."³⁵ Neumann told Glonek to sweep the area. One of Glonek's scouts found the command wire that led to the IED and followed it to a tent in a nearby nomad campsite. Glonek found bomb parts inside the tent but no evidence of the enemy.³⁶ The QRF assisted in other ways. Master Sergeant Mark Hamil, the battalion operations sergeant major, noticed that Hicks was visibly shaken, so he helped him maintain his composure. "I knew he was hurting, I knew he was struggling," explained Hamil. Hicks had been the company's first sergeant for less than six months. Hamil, who had been the company's first sergeant before him, spoke to as many men as he could, making sure they were all right and refocusing on their responsibilities.³⁷

Captain Glonek later reflected on the accuracy of the attack. He realized that the enemy knew that American commanders always rode in the middle of the column. "The best guess if you don't know," Glonek explained, "[is to] hit one of the vehicles in the middle, there might be somebody really important in there."³⁸ Major O'Connor felt that the IED was retaliation for Hallett's success at Buyana. The incident also recalibrated the Soldiers' understanding of their Strykers' protection. No

Soldier had been lost inside a Stryker in Iraq but Afghanistan presented a much more lethal set of challenges.³⁹

The QRF stayed overnight, protecting the burned Stryker until an Angel Flight—a helicopter used for removing fallen Soldiers—and recovery vehicles could arrive the next morning. Captain Swift's scout platoon set up a bypass to allow local traffic flow around the Stryker. Around midnight, a small convoy of trucks approached from the south and stopped approximately 800 meters away. Swift saw a sports utility vehicle pull up behind the trucks and men moving around. "It looked pretty shady," he recalled.⁴⁰ Swift continued to monitor the situation until he got word from one of his Soldiers using a Stryker's Long-Range Advanced Scout Surveillance System (LRAS3) that one of the men had an IED. As Swift tried to figure out who it was, the man suddenly blew himself up. "He screwed up," explained Swift.⁴¹

The blast wounded three other men, who had now revealed themselves as insurgents. A scout opened fire with a Stryker-mounted .50-caliber machine gun for about three minutes, then Swift led his snipers to the trucks while the insurgents dragged bodies into cars and drove away. "We found all of the blood trails," said Swift. "We found their shoes, [and] pieces of the guy that blew himself up."⁴² They also discovered holes the enemy had drilled into the road to place mortar shells. Swift and his men felt like they had gotten a little payback for their fallen comrades. "We were pretty happy," Swift explained, "thinking that we had possibly gotten the guys that had done it."⁴³

After the election and its aftermath, Lieutenant Colonel Neumann realized that his battalion was not up against some 30 to 40 insurgents in the Arghandab River Valley but an estimated 300. He also realized that the Shah Wali Kot was not an infiltration route into the Arghandab and then into Kandahar but that the Arghandab was itself an insurgent base. The thick vegetation provided cover and concealment where insurgents could operate free from Coalition interference. "They couldn't be seen from the air," explained Neumann. "They could move freely and get away with it."⁴⁴ In fact, the Taliban had reinforced and entrenched its position in the Arghandab months before the *Buffalos* arrived, moving additional forces to the area and sending foreign fighters to train locals in IED manufacturing.⁴⁵ To secure the area, Neumann realized, the enemy would have to be forced out of his well-entrenched safe havens. Fortunately, he and his brigade commander had been developing an operation that would achieve exactly this outcome.⁴⁶

Notes

1. Captain Zachary Osborne, interview by Kevin M. Hymel, Combat Studies Institute, Fort Leavenworth, KS, 24 April 2012, 22, 23, 27; Captain Brian Zangenburg, interview by Kevin M. Hymel, Combat Studies Institute, Fort Leavenworth, KS, 17 April 2012, 19.
2. Master Sergeant Troy Faver, interview by Kevin M. Hymel, Combat Studies Institute, Fort Leavenworth, KS, 18 September 2012, 25.
3. Osborne, interview, 24 April 2012, 29, 30, 31; Attu Company, 1-17 IN, group interview by Kevin M. Hymel, Combat Studies Institute, Fort Leavenworth, KS, 22 March 2012, 75.
4. A/1-17, group interview, 77.
5. A/1-17, group interview, 78; Faver, interview, 27, 28.
6. Sergeant First Class James Knowler, Combat Studies Institute, Fort Leavenworth, KS, 22 March 2012, 17.
7. Fadden, interview, 16, 19, 20, 21; Knowler, interview, 19.
8. Zangenburg, interview, 18; Captain Matthew Quiggle, interview by Kevin M. Hymel, Combat Studies Institute, Fort Leavenworth, KS, 10 April 2012, 8.
9. Zangenburg, interview, 21, 22, 23.
10. Neumann, e-mail, 2 January 2013.
11. Colonel Jonathan Neumann, interview by Kevin M. Hymel, Combat Studies Institute, Fort Leavenworth, KS, 20 April 2012, 33, 34.
12. Ahmed Rashid, *Taliban: Militant Islam, Oil and Fundamentalism in Central Asia* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2010), 234, 235.
13. Neumann, interview, 39, 40.
14. Charlie Company, 1-17 IN, group interview by Kevin M. Hymel, Combat Studies Institute, Fort Leavenworth, KS, 20 March, 2012, 11.
15. Staff Sergeant Kenneth Weiss, interview by Kevin M. Hymel, Combat Studies Institute, Fort Leavenworth, KS, 12 July 2012, 13.
16. Weiss, interview, 19.
17. Captain Joshua Bobbitt, interview by Kevin M. Hymel, Combat Studies Institute, Fort Leavenworth, KS, 16 March 2012, 6.
18. Weiss, interview, 29.
19. Weiss, interview, 28.
20. C/1-17, group interview, 12.
21. Weiss, interview, 28.
22. Captain Joshua Bobbitt, e-mail to Kevin M. Hymel, Combat Studies Institute, Fort Leavenworth, KS, 14 December 2012.

23. C/1-17, interview, 16.
24. Bobbitt, interview, 11.
25. Bobbitt, interview, 7, 8, 9, 10, 12; Weiss, interview, 35; Captain Joshua Bobbitt, e-mail to Kevin M. Hymel, Combat Studies Institute, Fort Leavenworth, KS, 19 July 2012.
26. Bobbitt, e-mail, 19 July 2012; Captain Joshua Bobbitt, e-mail to Kevin M. Hymel, Combat Studies Institute, Fort Leavenworth, KS, 17 December 2012.
27. Bobbitt, e-mail, 17 December 2012.
28. Major Joshua Glonek, interview by Kevin M. Hymel, Combat Studies Institute, Fort Leavenworth, KS, 25 May 2012, 14.
29. Glonek, interview, 54.
30. Glonek, interview, 54.
31. Glonek, interview, 17; First Sergeant Eugene Hicks, interview by Kevin M. Hymel, Combat Studies Institute, Fort Leavenworth, KS, 23 April 2012, 19.
32. Hicks, interview, 19.
33. Glonek, interview, 18, 22; Attu Company, 1-17, group interview by Kevin M. Hymel, Combat Studies Institute, Fort Leavenworth, KS, 19 March 2012, 36. "9 Fort Lewis Soldiers Killed in Afghanistan in 2 Weeks," Kirotv.com, 2 September, 2009. <http://www.kirotv.com/news/news/9-fort-lewis-soldiers-killed-in-afghanistan-in-2-w/nKT9n/>
34. Glonek, interview, 19, 24; Hicks, interview, 24; Major Ryan O'Conner, interview by Kevin M. Hymel, Combat Studies Institute, Fort Leavenworth, KS, 8 August 12, 40, 41.
35. Neumann, interview, 48.
36. Neumann, interview, 48, 49; Glonek, interview, 24.
37. Master Sergeant Hamil, interview by Kevin M. Hymel, Combat Studies Institute, Fort Leavenworth, KS, 18 April 2012, 23, 24; Benjamin Tupper, *Greetings From Afghanistan, Send More Ammo: Dispatches from Taliban Country* (New York: NAL Caliber, 2010) 73.
38. Glonek, interview, 27.
39. Major Ryan O'Conner, interview by Kevin M. Hymel, Combat Studies Institute, Fort Leavenworth, KS, 16 April 2012, 25, 26.
40. Captain Adam Swift, interview by Kevin M. Hymel, Combat Studies Institute, Fort Leavenworth, KS, 14 April 2012, 20.
41. Swift, interview, 20.
42. Swift, interview, 21.

43. Swift, interview, 23.
44. Neumann, interview, 113.
45. Carl Forsberg, *The Taliban's Campaign for Kandahar* (Washington, DC: The Institute for the Study of War, 2009) 54.
46. Neumann, interview, 111, 112, 113.

Chapter 4

OPPORTUNITY HOLD

Establishing a Foothold in the Arghandab

During the elections, Colonel Tunnell and his staff began planning an operation designed to seize the initiative from the enemy. That operation, called OPPORTUNITY HOLD, was a brigade-level action with two objectives: establish two permanent combat outposts and gather information on the enemy. Neumann's battalion would be the main effort, clearing the west bank of the Arghandab River from Babur to Shuyen-e Olya, covering the same areas where he had lost Tom and Yanney. In the town Shuyen-e Sofla south of Shuyen-e Olya, his men would establish the first outpost.¹

While Neumann's men combed through this area, Lieutenant Colonel Jeffrey French's 2d Battalion, 1st Infantry (2-1 IN), known as Task Force *Legion*, would keep the enemy busy to the southwest. French's battalion would attack from Nagahan, southwest of the Arghandab District Center, and drive northeast along the Arghandab River, disrupting the enemy south of the 1-17 IN's AO and preventing the insurgents from reinforcing their counterparts under assault by the *Buffalos'* main effort. They would also establish the second outpost south of the town Khosrow-e Olya.² With the two new outposts, Neumann would have a solid foothold in the Arghandab Valley while the intelligence gathering would help isolate the insurgent sanctuaries from the district government and population if they tried to return.

On Neumann's recommendation, Colonel Tunnell chose Captain Mike Kovalsky to replace Hallett as the commander of Alpha Company. Kovalsky was relatively new to the brigade and junior to many other captains, but as the assistant operations officer for the battalion and a battle captain, he had participated in planning OPPORTUNITY HOLD. "He knew the plan better than anybody," said Major Jennings.³ Kovalsky, who had served two previous tours in Iraq, introduced himself to the men of Alpha Company by explaining that he was proud to serve with them but it was obviously not the way he wanted to assume command. He concluded by telling them he would do everything in his power to defeat the enemy and make them pay for killing Captain Hallett and the three others who died in his Stryker.⁴

For the first phase of OPPORTUNITY HOLD, Neumann planned for Bravo Company to advance out of COP Jelawur and proceed to the town of Babur, four kilometers to the northwest between Route RED

DOG and the Arghandab River. Charlie Company, the main effort, would follow Bravo and pass through it at Babur, then proceed to clear northeast through the villages of Shuyen-e Sofla, Shuyen-e Vosta, and Shuyen-e Olya, in that order. At the same time, Alpha Company would advance southwest from FOB Frontenac, drive through the desert then pivot east to serve as a blocking force against any enemy trying to flee west from the advancing Bravo and Charlie companies. Alpha would be the anvil to Bravo and Charlie companies' hammer. As the brigade's main effort, 1-17 IN received Captain Mathew Quiggle's Alpha Troop from 8th Squadron, 1st Cavalry (8-1 CAV), to screen the east bank of the Arghandab River. Neumann knew the enemy had sewn IEDs along Route RED DOG, expecting his forces to use the road and then approach from the west. He hoped that by approaching the villages from the southeast, he would surprise the insurgents.⁵

With the cavalry troop acting as the battalion's eyes and ears, Neumann placed his scouts near Checkpoint 18, an ANP station at a bridge over the Arghandab River on Route BEAR approximately 11 kilometers north of Babur (see Figure 12). The checkpoint stood astride one of the enemy's main infiltration/exfiltration lanes into the Arghandab River Valley where insurgents attacked the ANP almost nightly. Neumann tasked the scouts with providing early warning and possible target acquisition.⁶

On the morning of 28 August, Alpha Company, now under Captain Kovalsky, along with Captain Quiggle's Alpha Troop, departed FOB Frontenac. Alpha Company raced south through the desert, driving parallel to, but west of, Route RED DOG, then crossed the road and arrived north of Shuyen-e Olya, setting up blocking positions.⁷ Alpha Troop set up on the opposite side of Babur in the Arghandab River. "[The riverbed] offered great mobility," Quiggle explained, "and initially it was dry."⁸ Where there was water, it was split into numerous channels and sandbars for easy travel. Quiggle sent some of his troops up a hill, where they watched Alpha Company cut across the desert.⁹

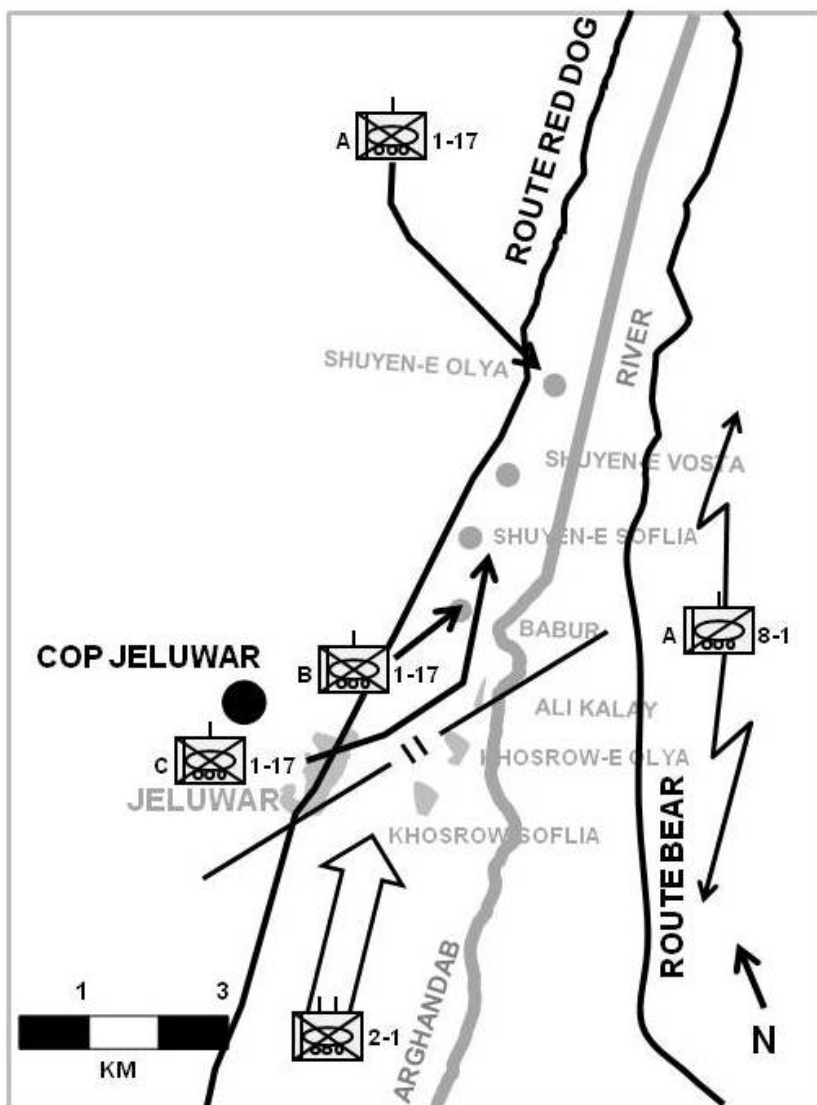


Figure 12. Operation OPPORTUNITY HOLD, the push north, advancing on Babur.

Source: author/CSI generated

Bravo Company's morning advance started off poorly. As Lieutenant Ryan Fadden's 1st Platoon drove through the desert toward Route RED DOG, the men noticed a mother with a baby and two children, ages six and ten, walking south along the route. The family was about 200 meters away when one of them stepped on an IED. The explosion tore through the whole family. Soldiers quickly dismounted their Strykers and raced to help. The blast badly lacerated the mother's face and left shrapnel wounds in her baby's arms, legs, and head. Staff Sergeant Prince took the baby to the medical evacuation Stryker, where he wiped dirt out of its mouth and gave it water.¹⁰ Fadden tried to put a tourniquet on the six-year-old who had lost both arms. The tourniquet was too big but that was unimportant. "The heat of the blast had immediately cauterized the wound," recalled Fadden.¹¹



Figure 13. A Stryker delivers supplies across the Arghandab River in southern Afghanistan.

Photo courtesy of Major Ryan O'Connor, US Army

When Sergeant James Knowler saw the medic doing a poor job of applying a tourniquet on the ten-year-old boy, he shoved the medic aside and did it himself. The boy's right leg had been ripped open but that wound had also cauterized. Knowler placed the tourniquet as high as he could, but as he picked up the boy, he noticed severe lacerations in the boy's right shoulder and a fractured arm. Knowler put another tourniquet underneath the boy's armpit, and pulled tight. "I could hear his shoulder breaking, I

was squeamish” he recalled but he had to stop the bleeding. Staff Sergeant Kenneth Rickman encouraged him, “You got it.”¹² Knowler continued to tightened the tourniquet and the bleeding stopped.

As the troops assisted the family to the medical evacuation Stryker, Captain Pope reported the casualties. Fadden’s men set up a security perimeter and searched the blast area, picking up body parts. Thinking that the village elders might blame the Americans, Pope then ordered his men to take pictures of the wounded so the elders would know of what the Taliban were responsible. The woman’s husband arrived and the Soldiers explained what happened. When the MEDEVAC helicopter landed, they permitted the husband to depart with his family. Despite the severity of the wounds, the entire family survived. The incident confirmed for Lieutenant Colonel Neumann the existence of an IED belt along Route RED DOG.¹³

The civilian casualties delayed Bravo Company approximately 90 minutes and slowed Pope’s approach to Babur. Having previously lost Soldiers to IEDs, he wanted to make sure his men advanced cautiously. During their dismounted movement into the Green Zone, the men stayed off trails, forded canals, and breached walls until another casualty slowed Pope’s progress. His Air Force Explosive Ordnance Disposal (EOD) non-commissioned Officer (NCO) went down with heat exhaustion in the 130-degree heat. Pope sent him to the rear with an escort. “So I lose my EOD team right off the bat,” he later related.¹⁴



Figure 14. Bravo Company Soldiers enter a typical pomegranate orchard in the Arghandab’s Green Zone.

Photo courtesy of Major James Pope, US Army

As Bravo and Charlie companies pushed north, Alpha Company intercepted military-aged males streaming through their location in the desert. There were no women and children. Almost every male they encountered wore sneakers, a telltale sign that they were Taliban fighters (most civilian males wore sandals). The Soldiers detained anyone with more than one cell phone, put them in flex-cuffs, and handed them over to a human intelligence (HUMINT) unit for questioning. The detained men almost always claimed to be simple farmers.¹⁵ The Soldiers also scanned the faces, eyes, and fingerprints of military-aged males with biometric recording equipment to discover if the individuals had previously been identified as insurgents. However, the devices were not perfect, finding some of the detainees to be *likely* insurgents but unable to confirm that identification. One man tested positive for explosives but the test proved inconclusive because it could not differentiate between fertilizer and explosives so the Soldiers let him pass.¹⁶ Similarly, Alpha Troop posted in the shallow river, intercepted old men and women along with children. Many were in cars or on motorcycles, some accompanied by their livestock. The cavalry soldiers worked with local ANP and a HUMINT team but they gathered little useful information. Most claimed that the Taliban had come into their houses and demanded their food. “We don’t want them here,” they told the Americans.¹⁷

The *Buffalos* used every possible asset during the operation. To try to draw the enemy out of the orchards, Sergeant First Class Stephen Muzchka, the electronic warfare NCO, worked with the battalion intelligence officer to create messages insulting the enemy’s fighting ability. They gave them to pilots to broadcast while flying over the battlefield. “So instead of hiding in the orchards, [we hoped] they would actually fight us because they’d be so mad,” explained Muzchka, “and that’s when we’d overwhelm [them] with superior firepower.” Muzchka made at least 50 recordings during the operation but the enemy never took the bait.¹⁸

As Bravo Company pushed toward Babur, the enemy shadowed the Soldiers and reported their positions to their superiors on hand-held radios. The Americans engaged the elusive enemy wherever they could. “We showed them it’s not a good idea to get close,” explained Lieutenant Boirum.¹⁹ By 1600, Lieutenant Fadden’s platoon reached the outskirts of the village and began clearance operations, during which his men found huge caches of RPGs. Charlie Company, behind Bravo, pushed briskly north in the thick of the Green Zone. Captain Kassulke, concerned that his men could be easily ambushed, wanted to get them to a defensible position before the sun set. Pope’s men, seeing movement behind them

and having monitored enemy communications, opened fire, assuming they were Taliban. “Cease fire!” Pope called out, realizing they were firing on Charlie Company.²⁰ Fortunately, no one was injured and Kassulke’s company spent the night in a small *wadi* south of Babur.²¹

Clearing to the North

The next day, 29 August, Bravo and Charlie companies experienced more confusion in the thick vegetation. A CH-47 Chinook helicopter flew in to drop pallets of water for Bravo Company but the pilot had communications trouble and ended up dropping the supplies close to Charlie. Not knowing Charlie Company’s exact location, soldiers from Lieutenant Fadden’s platoon worked their way to the pallets and saw movement in the bushes. They fired two grenades at the threat before realizing the other men were their comrades. Fortunately, like the day before, no one was injured.²²

The two friendly fire incidents infuriated Lieutenant Colonel Neumann. He felt he had provided substantial instructions and clear control measures for the two companies to advance in close proximity to each other but the company commanders had become accustomed to operating independently. In the operation, they had not maintained situational awareness outside their units and had not adjusted fire control measures accordingly. Almost immediately after the incidents, Neumann provided very accurate and restrictive control measures, forcing both Pope and Kassulke to use icons on their Land Warrior Systems to mark their locations. Neumann also had Pope draw an updated company boundary between the two companies. Finally, Neumann ordered both commanders to verbally confirm their locations to the TAC. After the two incidents he avoided, whenever possible, moving his companies in such close proximity. Neumann took responsibility for both incidents. “It was a battalion-level operation and my fault for not ensuring this type of incident didn’t happen.”²³

Pope’s men spent the next two days clearing the deserted town of Babur. They preceded their entry into buildings with explosives to detonate any IEDs. The crater where Berschinski lost his legs served as a grim reminder of the importance of finding every IED. One Soldier tried to break down a gate by firing a grenade at it but the round caromed off the metal, soared high and landed near an engineer Stryker in Alpha Company’s AO. Seeing the round land, Sergeant First Class Bobby Ciman walked over to some engineers and told them, “You might want to come take care of this.”²⁴

The men often waded through canals. “The insurgents can’t waterproof IEDs,” explained Pope.²⁵ The treks through the chest-deep, stagnant water

were not pleasant. “[It was] just nasty, smells and got crabs,” said Sergeant Prince, “[but] it feels pretty good when its 130 degrees outside.”²⁶ The men also carried small ladders to climb over walls. To breach walls quietly, the men used a Halligan bar, or as they called it, a “hooligan bar” or “hooli tool”—a crow-bar like device to separate the bricks in walls. Because they did not have mine clearing line charges (MICLICs), which were fired into mine fields and then detonated to destroy any buried IEDs, the men created their own by tying one end of detonating cord—a thin plastic tube packed with explosives—around a rock, then throwing the rock as far as possible down a path with the cord trailing behind like a tethered kite. After detonating the cord and allowing the dust to clear, the men would check for pressure plates.²⁷



Figure 15. Bravo Company Soldiers traverse a canal in the Arghandab River Valley.

Photo courtesy of Major James Pope, US Army

On the night of 30 August, Bravo Company occupied a compound in Babur when Pope received a message from Charlie Company that personnel with weapons were heading in his direction. From their rooftop positions, some of Pope’s men spotted figures approaching. First Sergeant Tony Holcomb jumped up and opened fire. The enemy was so close that some of Pope’s men were throwing hand grenades from their machine-gun posts. Pope contacted Captain Eric Livengood, the battalion fire support

officer, and requested support from his company 120mm mortars against the insurgents. However, when he reported the target, Livengood told Pope he needed to clear the air space first. Pope did not see anything in the sky above. “We’re in contact right now, people are shooting at us, and we’re shooting at them,” he told Livengood.²⁸ Neumann’s staff questioned Pope’s need for mortars. “[Pope is] in a firefight at 75 meters [from the enemy] in the orchards,” Major O’Connor, who was with Livengood, later said, “Everyone’s in covered and concealed positions. They’re using small arms. Why do you feel the need to call in 120 mm mortars?”²⁹

From Pope’s perspective, the skies were clear and the enemy was close, so he decided to open fire without the battalion’s permission. The mortars came streaking in but landed in a flooded field and failed to detonate. The men only heard a sucking sound. Pope then called for a high explosive round with a proximity fuse, which would detonate with an air burst. The round exploded on the opposite side of a wall 75 meters from Pope’s position. “We’re danger close,” Pope explained, “but I’ve got numerous mud walls in between us.”³⁰ Even so, shrapnel flew over the men’s heads. The rounds ended the engagement. Pope later found out that the mortars had killed at least one insurgent. The incident taught two important lessons: proximity fuses worked best in the Arghandab and that mortars ended contacts quickly. Staff Sergeant Kyle Crump defended the need for mortars, saying, “We all knew we couldn’t catch the Taliban on foot, or really maneuver effectively in that mess, in that heat, with all that [equipment] on.”³¹

While Pope’s men cleared Babur, Kassulke’s men passed through Bravo Company and cleared north through to Shuyen-e Sofla and Shuyen-e Vosta. Like Babur, the Shuyen-e villages were ghost towns. Kassulke’s men also stayed off trails and breached holes in walls in random places. “You never take the easy way,” explained Lieutenant Bobbitt of 3d Platoon, “you don’t ever do that.”³² In Shuyen-e Sofla, Kassulke’s men cleared a compound that would become one of the two new combat outposts, later named Brick Two.

While Pope and Kassulke cleared their empty towns, Captain Kovalsky pushed Alpha Company into Shuyen-e Olya. What he and his men found surprised them. “Families and kids were playing in the river,” said Kovalsky, “just splashing around, having a good time.”³³ The children were a good omen. The men knew if something bad were going to happen, the children would have been evacuated from the area. The Soldiers, however, did not hand out anything to the kids. Lieutenant Osborne did not allow it. “We didn’t give out candy to the kids, because that can be

counterproductive, for them and for us,” Osborne later explained. “It can potentially put them in danger.”³⁴ The men met with the village elders who were not happy with the Americans’ presence. They did not want to be in the middle of a war zone. The Soldiers searched the village and a pomegranate orchard but found nothing.³⁵

Clearing the Shuyen-e Villages

On the morning of 31 August, Captain Kassulke’s 3d Platoon, led by Lieutenant Bobbitt, patrolled down a pomegranate orchard trail in Shuyen-e Sofla when the troops found a hole in a wall. Supposing the ANA ahead of them had blown it, the Soldiers decided to go through. The first man passed with no trouble but as Specialist Tyler Walshe climbed through, he was engulfed in an explosion. Bobbitt immediately set up a perimeter but the enemy did not fire. The men searched the 10-foot wide crater for Walshe and found his body 75 meters away. An engineer element moving with Charlie Company cleared the area, ensuring there were no other IEDs.

Later that day, as the sun sank on the horizon, Bobbitt’s Platoon finished clearing the town while Lieutenant Brian Giroux’s 2d Platoon maneuvered to link up with him. Giroux’s 3d Squad found itself walking through an area they had been through repeatedly. The men’s Land Warrior system had failed, leaving them literally in the dark, even though they knew they were close to Bobbitt’s patrol base where they were scheduled to link up. Knowing that the enemy emplaced IEDs where the Americans had recently passed, Staff Sergeant William Taylor ordered the men to start back and find a different angle of approach. At that moment, Private First Class Jordon Brochu stepped on an IED. The blast tore off Brochu’s legs and an arm. It also killed Specialist Jonathan D. Welch, who was walking near Brochu. Four other soldiers were wounded.³⁶

Those not wounded, began treating their comrades. Canadian medics attached to the platoon rushed over and applied tourniquets to Brochu’s wounds and gave him CPR as Sergeant Julian Galaz, the company senior medic, went from soldier to soldier monitoring their conditions. The blast was so powerful that debris landed near Captain Kassulke, 100 meters to the rear, who ran to the scene. Giroux requested a MEDEVAC helicopter while Staff Sergeant Jason Chase crossed a canal and set up a HLZ but Brochu died before the MEDEVAC arrived. The four other wounded men survived, thanks to the efforts of Galaz and the efficient Canadian medics. Giroux and his men spent hours dealing with the deadly situation. When it was over, they continued their patrol, although the day’s casualties left the

men of Charlie Company shaken. “We took care of our fallen and then we drove on with our operation,” said Kassulke. “No matter how bad things got for us, we knew there was always the next part of the mission.”³⁷

Lieutenant Colonel Neumann and part of his TAC showed up while the wounded were evacuated. Neumann reassured the men that, despite their losses, they were doing everything that needed to be done on the objective and for their fallen comrades. He also shared the battalion’s IED threat assessment. The enemy had prepared multi-layered ambush sites and anti-personnel IEDs along the orchard-edge of the villages in hopes of drawing the Americans in after penetrating the anti-vehicle IED belt along RED DOG. Neumann then told Kassulke to assume every orchard-side entrance to a compound and every footbridge over a canal that bordered an orchard was mined. He wanted to make sure Kassulke understood the enemy’s intent. “For small units on the ground it’s sometimes hard to look past the individual blast sites (which can seem very random) and see the bigger template of the enemy methods,” Neumann later explained.³⁸

Scout Operations at Checkpoint 18

On 1 September, while the *Buffalo’s* rifle companies cleared Babur and the Shuyen-e villages, the battalion scouts departed FOB Frontenac in three Strykers for their mission of setting up observation posts at Checkpoint 18, where they would provide early warning and possible target acquisition for the battalion. Hoping to avoid IEDs, the scouts drove through the desert and approached the bridge from the west as the sun set. Three miles from the bridge, the men witnessed a firefight between the ANP and insurgents in a pomegranate orchard. Captain Swift reported the contact to Lieutenant Colonel Neumann then stopped his Strykers to monitor the engagement.³⁹

The scouts watched the engagement for 90 minutes until they detected four individuals walking back and forth along RED DOG, approximately 1,000 meters away. One had a RPG slung over his shoulder, another carried a weapon. They seemed to be carrying equipment from a house. Some of the men were goose stepping, possibly measuring distances. Staff Sergeant Isaik Matheson volunteered to get closer on foot. He led two sniper teams out of their Stryker, across several *wadis* and crawled to a spot 200 meters from the men. Using the night-vision scopes on their rifles, they could clearly see the men were planting an IED. Swift radioed them, “I’m going to consider this PID (positive identification). He’s got a weapon, he’s putting in an IED. If you can get a shot, you take it.”⁴⁰ Neumann, who had been monitoring the situation, came on line. “Roger PID, engage if you can.”⁴¹

Neumann gave the order to engage to relieve Swift of having his decision later questioned. Neumann was concerned that his subordinate commanders, after making a tough call that could be later called into question, might second guess themselves, or worse, waste precious time in a future firefight unnecessarily weighing options while their Soldiers were at risk. "I wanted them to know I trusted their judgment and was ready to back them up." Neumann's situational awareness also helped him override any of the ground commanders' emotions at the point of an engagement. The activity confirmed Neumann's intelligence that the enemy had been active at Checkpoint 18 for the past month. "I knew immediately they needed to engage."⁴²

It took three minutes for the snipers to set up their shots using the buddy method, resting their rifles on their spotters' shoulders. Three shots popped off and three men went down. The fourth man ran back into the house. The snipers remained in place, waiting for him to return and drag away his comrades. As they waited, the firefight in the distance tapered off. "Whoever was playing was done for the night," Swift later said.⁴³ He ordered the snipers back to the Strykers, telling them they would try to find another location to overwatch the area. As Staff Sergeant Matheson's team disengaged, the enemy opened up with machine guns from the orchard. The snipers bounded back, returning fire as tracers whipped by their legs. The Strykers raced forward, closing the gap with the snipers while laying down suppressing fire with two .50-caliber machine guns, two Mk-19 grenade launchers, and four M-240 machine guns. "The more firepower we put down on them, the more would come back at us," recalled Private First Class Joshua Seaver.⁴⁴ Rounds ricocheted off the Strykers as they braked and dropped their ramps. The snipers climbed aboard.

While the Strykers pulled out, a RPG sailed overhead. The men stopped firing their weapons so the enemy could not track them but the insurgents continued to fire RPGs as the vehicles drove away. The rounds were so close that some of the men suspected that the enemy possessed night-vision devices.⁴⁵ The Strykers headed north to the village of Damaneh, five kilometers away along Route RED DOG where the men reloaded their weapons and reorganized. They were excited with their success and gave each other high-fives. The platoon then headed south again, taking a different path, and set up in a different location. For an hour, the scouts monitored the road with their LRS3, then witnessed two men walk out of an orchard and begin digging in the road. They were three kilometers away, too far to engage. So Swift contacted two Kiowa Warriors. The helicopters circled above while Swift pinpointed their location. The two insurgents,

hearing the noise overhead, stopped digging and hid under a tree. It did not offer them the protection they sought. The Kiowas made a gun run, firing .50-caliber rounds and rockets. Swift, watching the action on the LRAS3, saw both men drop in a cloud of dust. Approximately an hour later, two more men showed up and began digging in the same spot. "It was pretty much the same scenario," said Swift.⁴⁶ The helicopter circled, the men ran to a tree only to be gunned down. The scouts and snipers remained in their position until daybreak but the area remained quiet. Before the scouts could return to post, however, they were called to provide security for an engineer Humvee that had hit an IED further south.⁴⁷

After securing the engineers, the scouts returned to FOB Frontenac. Their success encouraged them to conduct more night patrols. They headed out again on 5 September. As they drove south, they noticed a man digging holes behind them in their tire tracks. They drove a bit further, with Swift watching the man on his LRAS3. He called in a Kiowa helicopter. The man ran into a grape hut as Swift directed the helicopter to the target, where it opened fire with its .50-caliber machine gun. After sunrise, Swift found the man dead inside with an AK47 rifle.

Their patrol complete, the scouts headed back to FOB Frontenac, but as they drove by a hostile town through a small river bed, Swift's Stryker ran over an IED. The explosion ripped off the two right front tires and destroyed the engine. The explosion proved less intense than the one that knocked Swift down into his Stryker on 14 August. Concerned about a possible ambush, Swift ordered the Stryker behind him to ram his vehicle and push it out of the kill zone. The rear Stryker drove forward and plowed Swift's vehicle ahead 150 meters. The men inside Swift's Stryker were jostled around but no worse than a usual drive through the Arghandab's bumpy terrain. Once everyone was safely away from the point of impact, the men hooked the damaged Stryker to another Stryker using tow cables (the terrain was too rough for towbars). Swift ordered everyone out of his Stryker for the rest of the journey since personnel were not allowed to remain in towed vehicles. None of Swift's men were seriously injured in the attack but the platoon took an extra hour to return to the FOB. "We were kind of embarrassed that we got blown up again," Swift recalled.⁴⁸

The scouts and snipers accomplished their mission of providing early warning and possible target acquisition for the battalion during OPPORTUNITY HOLD. In addition, their actions helped Lieutenant Colonel Neumann wear down the enemy. While the battalion still could not pinpoint the insurgents' exact disposition, composition, or strength, the *Buffalos* were taking the fight to the enemy and keeping them off

balance. “We made it an unsafe area for them to operate,” said Neumann.⁴⁹ The scouts and snipers provided the battalion the time and space to travel through the area, supported operations on the west side of the Arghandab River, and helped build a better outpost at Checkpoint 18. “Overall,” Neumann later explained, “it was an outstanding example of maximizing our capabilities: advanced optics, communications, combined arms integration, [and] tactical and technical excellence at the specialty platoon level.”⁵⁰

The Drive South

The first phase of OPPORTUNITY HOLD was a success. The Buffalos had cleared their AO and established the first outpost. While the scouts performed their mission on 1 September, Neumann returned most of Alpha Company to Shah Wali Kot and ordered Captain Pope to turn south and clear the three villages of Ali Kalay, Khosrow-e Olya, and Khosrow-e Sofla. Captain Quiggle, stationed in the river, had noticed insurgents running through the tree lines near the three towns during the push north and Neumann wanted them cleared. He also wanted to support Bravo Company with more troops. His staff worked the problem for two days and concluded the best way to advance south was to have Quiggle’s troop drive down the shallow Arghandab River. To test the theory, they tasked Quiggle with traversing the length of the river in Strykers. He sent out a reconnaissance platoon to ensure that even the deeper parts of the river were trafficable. “I didn’t want to risk getting a vehicle mired during the insertion,” Quiggle recalled.⁵¹ Once the platoon identified a usable route, the staff briefed Neumann on the plan. He liked the idea and added 3d Platoon from Alpha Company to Quiggle’s troop.⁵² “We figured we could get speed and surprise coming from the east,” explained Major O’Connor, “We figured nobody had tried that one before, and they hadn’t.”⁵³

Neumann sent Bravo Company south on 2 September, first to clear east towards the river, and then south into Ali Kalay. Meanwhile, Quiggle arrived east of Ali Kalay after a night advance down the river. As predicted, the enemy did not expect the Americans to use the river to maneuver and were caught off guard by the sudden presence of so many troops. The battalion TAC led by Major O’Connor accompanied Quiggle. As the cavalry troop traveled down the Arghandab and neared the village, it came across something unexpected – hordes of civilians leaving the area. Undaunted, the troop dismounted and headed west into the village, leaving their Strykers in the riverbed for fire support. Alpha Troop’s Strykers were soon joined by Bravo Company’s Strykers. Unable to accompany their own Soldiers, Lieutenant Matthew Kuecker, Bravo Company’s executive

officer, led the company's Strykers north, and then entered the river, driving south until they caught up with Alpha Troops' Strykers.⁵⁴

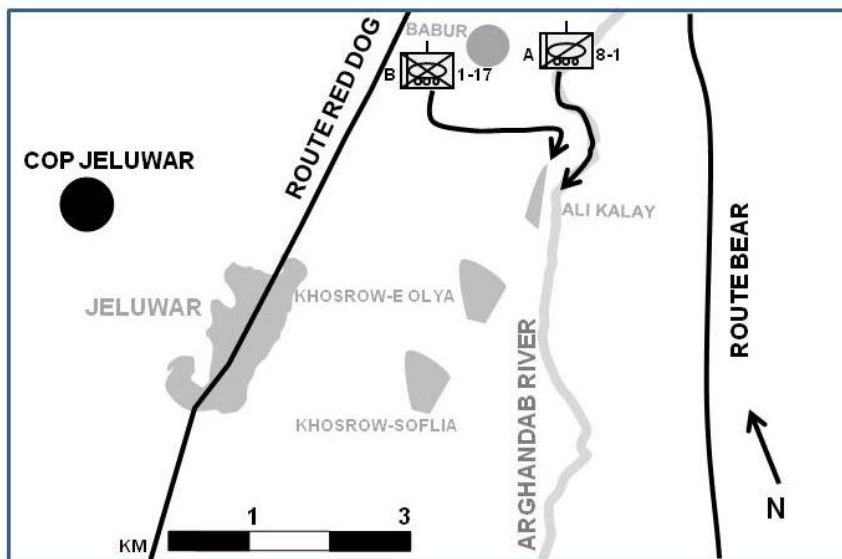


Figure 16. Operation OPPORTUNITY HOLD, the advance south.

Source: author/CSI generated

Meanwhile, Pope had climbed a tree to observe his company's dismounted advance south through Ali Kalay. Boirum's 3d Platoon was on his right, Fadden's 1st Platoon on the left. When insurgents opened fire on Fadden's men, they returned fire while Boirum's men swung left and joined the firefight, pressing the enemy from two sides. Quiggle's troop with 3d Platoon from Alpha Company, coming up from the river, closed in from the south, trapping the insurgents between themselves and Bravo Company.⁵⁵ A Kiowa Warrior helicopter chased an insurgent carrying a PKM machine gun into a hut. Because the Soldiers on the ground were so close to the structure, the Kiowa overflew the target to obtain positive identification, then circled around and fired rockets, destroying the hut. During the engagement, Quiggle's Soldiers held their fire. "Had we returned fire we probably would have shot into [Bravo] Company's lines," explained Staff Sergeant Michael Brown.⁵⁶ When it ended, Sergeant Ciman of Alpha Company walked up to Sergeant First Class Holcomb of Bravo Company and asked him, "How come every time we roll with you we get shot at?"⁵⁷



Figure 17. A Stryker makes its way down the Arghandab River.

Photo courtesy Lieutenant Colonel Jonathan Neumann, US Army

While the firefight raged, a group of insurgents made their way to the tall grass along the river and opened fire on the TAC's vehicles with RPGs, AK47s, and PKM machine guns. Staff Sergeant Nick Furfari was hammering his OE-254 antenna stakes into the sand when the enemy opened fire. Everyone else dove into the vehicle, but he remained, banging away at the stakes until the antenna array was complete. Major O'Connor fired a few rounds from his M4 rifle but the .50-caliber machine guns from Alpha Troop and Bravo Company's Strykers quickly dispatched the insurgents attacking the TAC.⁵⁸

In the village, Quiggle's troops found few people. One man came down the road from another village and spoke to Quiggle's interpreter. Staff Sergeant Brown was convinced the man was Taliban but since he had no weapon, he was not detained. Later, Quiggle's men were passing through a breach in a wall and were about a third of the way across a field when insurgents opened up with RPGs and machinegun fire. One RPG rocket flew four feet above Quiggle's head. While men in the lead element returned fire and moved back to cover, Quiggle pushed the rest of his men up to the wall and returned fire with rifles and M-240 machineguns. Bravo Company's Staff Sergeant Ryan Sharp saw the engagement, stood up on a mud wall, and told his men not to shoot. Using his M-203 grenade launcher, he lobbed ten rounds over the cavalrymen's heads and into the enemy.⁵⁹ Quiggle called in a nearby F-18 Hornet fighter jet to fly in as low as possible to scare the insurgents. The plane roared in and dropped flares. "That guy came in about 50 feet off the bank and scared us as much as he

probably did the enemy,” said Quiggle.⁶⁰ In fact, one of the Soldiers in the TAC Stryker heard the F-18 and shouted “RPG!” and hit the deck.⁶¹ The F-18 had the desired effect and the enemy disengaged. The firefight lasted only five minutes before the enemy withdrew and the troop went back to searching buildings.

During this action, Pope pushed his company past a road intersection and set up a blocking position in a grape field. When Boirum’s platoon took fire from the field and a grape hut, Pope called in mortar rounds while he ran toward the position. Unfortunately, he made a mistake. “While running,” he later admitted, “I read the wrong grid.”⁶² Captain Livengood and Major O’Connor received Pope’s request and realized he was calling in a strike on a Land Warrior friendly icon marker. Livengood denied the mission, then pointed the problem out to Neumann, who got on the net and told Pope to check his fire and rework his data. Pope, exhausted from days of fighting and frustrated that his request was being denied, complained, but Neumann stood firm. Captain Livengood called the guns directly, telling them, “Do not fire!”⁶³ Finally, Pope reworked his numbers and reported them to the TAC. Neumann, satisfied that the mission was safe, released the mortars and Pope fired the mission.⁶⁴

To Neumann, the incident proved that the system worked. Staff members who maintained their situational awareness and a focused eye on all indirect fires could help an exhausted ground commander. It also proved the value of the Land Warrior System, which alerted Neumann and his staff to a potential friendly fire incident. Without the system, explained Neumann, “we could not have checked the work of a very tired company commander and prevent[ed] troops from being put in danger.”⁶⁵

Once the mortars hit the area, Pope ordered Boirum to work his way through a grape row toward the hut from which his unit was being engaged. Meanwhile, the rest of Pope’s men provided covering fire. Two Kiowa helicopters flew over the area and the insurgents stopped firing. Pope directed the pilots to the hut. The first pilot fired two 2.75 mm rockets while the second fired 20 rounds from his .50 caliber machine gun. The rockets collapsed the roof, trapping an insurgent. The pilot circled the hut and, instead of firing another rocket, pulled out an M4 rifle and shot the insurgent.⁶⁶ “My Soldiers were like, ‘damn, that was a good shot,’” recalled Pope.⁶⁷

Enemy fire died down but Pope still wanted suppressing fire on the remnants of the insurgent force in a nearby orchard. He contacted the mortar unit and requested a new fire mission. Unfortunately, the mortars

had not been registered so he and Prince discussed the risks of firing. When Prince told Pope, “It should be safe,” they called in the mission.⁶⁸ The rounds exploded 30 meters from Boirum’s men. Although the Soldiers were protected by grape rows and huts, they were furious. In spite of this, Pope called in more mortar fire, adding 100 meters to their distance. Fifteen explosions followed in the orchard, enabling Boirum’s men to finally clear what was left of the building.⁶⁹ Pope later discovered that the mortar that had fired the initial round had not been seated on its base plate and had fired cold, reducing the weapon’s range.

As dusk loomed, the wind increased, preventing helicopters from flying overwatch. Both Bravo Company and Alpha Troop were dangerously low on water. More importantly, Captain Quiggle was about to lose another asset. The ANA Soldiers with 3d Platoon, Alpha Company, refused to patrol after 1600 in honor of Ramadan. “I remember our platoon getting upset [and asking] why are we stopping?” said Quiggle.⁷⁰ Quiggle’s cavalrymen were strewn out in the fields and orchards. The troop commander knew he was in a bad place, so he turned to one of his platoon sergeants and told him, “This is a stupid place to spend the night.”⁷¹ He found two houses and put his men in them. Pope also used a compound for his bed-down site, breaching a hole in a mud wall that surrounded the compound and putting two of his platoons in an adjacent orchard.⁷²

As the Soldiers bedded down in Khosrow-e Olya, Lieutenant Colonel Neumann drove south to join Major O’Connor at the TAC. After passing a firefight between the ANA and insurgents at Checkpoint 18, Neumann radioed Quiggle to send a Stryker to lead his column down the river. “I didn’t want to bang down the river and all of a sudden hit a soft spot and get stuck,” explained Neumann.⁷³ When he finally reached the TAC that night, O’Connor reported to him that the operation had achieved surprise, evident from the people fleeing the village.⁷⁴

Night Actions

It was not a quiet night for Bravo Company. Taliban scouts probed Pope’s perimeter, using dog-like howls to signal each other when they had reached the American lines. Sergeant Matthew Dick heard the howls and went out to the perimeter with an M-203 grenade launcher equipped with a night-vision device. He spotted a man coming over a berm near him, howling and holding his hand to his ear to listen for other howlers. Dick’s night sight indicated that the insurgent was 130 meters away. He aimed and fired. The round exploded on the man’s chest and the howling stopped.⁷⁵

Elsewhere on Lieutenant Fadden's perimeter, Staff Sergeant James Knowler positioned himself behind a berm with a Claymore mine facing toward the enemy. He should not have been there. Fadden had picked a different spot for an observation post (OP) but Knowler had checked it out and judged it too vulnerable to ambush and too far from the platoon's perimeter. He relocated to a more defensible position, set up there, and then asked Fadden for permission. The lieutenant agreed. Knowler, a superstitious man, had picked the midnight shift because he did not want to stand guard on 2 September. "My birthday is September 5," he later explained, "[and] there's no way I'm going to die on an even number."⁷⁶ About 10 minutes into his shift he heard the sound of tree branch snapping under a foot. Instinctively, he knew that no animal weighed enough to do that. He closed his eyes and cocked his left ear toward the noise, holding the Claymore's trigger in his hands. When he heard a second snap, he squeezed the firing device, exploding the Claymore. After the detonation, a Soldier near Knowler whispered, "That stick didn't even finish snapping and you hit it."⁷⁷ Knowler listened again and this time heard some rustling by a tree where he was supposed to have set up his original OP. He fired five rounds at the sound and heard a thud and someone grunting, followed by coughing. Knowler knew he was listening to someone with a punctured lung.

First Sergeant Tony Holcomb appeared and wanted to know who fired the Claymore. Knowler acknowledged responsibility and Holcomb calmed down because he trusted Knowler. However, when Holcomb wondered aloud if an American squad was in the field, a shocked Knowler let loose with a string of curses until Holcomb finally confirmed there were no Americans outside the perimeter. Captain Pope dropped mortar rounds on the suspected insurgent but Knowler still heard coughing. Every time he did, he closed his eyes, listened for another cough and fired at the sound. He knew that if he had set up his OP where Fadden wanted, he would be dead. The next day a Soldier told Knowler he was a pretty good shot. When Knowler asked him why, the man explained, "Because I saw three shots in a tree that were centimeters from each other, and saw a little bit of blood."⁷⁸

The End of the Operation

That morning, 3 September, the enemy reminded the Americans that they were still around. Captain Quiggle had just sent one of his squads and Lieutenant Zangenburg's platoon to get water from the Strykers in the river when insurgents opened up with machine gun fire from the same orchard as the day before. Simultaneously, insurgents opened fire on

the units retrieving water. The Strykers provided suppressing fire while Quiggle's men on the rooftop also returned fire.

Quiggle ran to the rooftop where he saw Staff Sergeant Marco Marsalis firing at the enemy in the orchard. "Machine gun, 200 meters," Marsalis told Quiggle while pointing west.⁷⁹ Quiggle radioed Pope, who dropped 20 60-mm mortar rounds on the orchard. The enemy disengaged as some of Quiggle's men ran through the breached wall and cleared the orchard, finding numerous blood trails. The engagement had lasted 10 minutes.⁸⁰

Quiggle linked up with Pope and the two tied in their flanks and so together they cleared south through the fields and orchards. Bravo Company advanced on the west while Alpha Troop advanced on the east with the Strykers in the riverbed paralleling the cavalymen and preventing the enemy from escaping east. As they swept through the area, Pope's men noticed a red ribbon in a tree and a tree branch lying across the road. Pope stopped the column and the men discovered a buried IED, which they detonated with C4 explosives. "We were trying to figure out how the civilians knew to walk up and down the trails and not step on an IED," said Pope.⁸¹ From then on, the men always looked at the trees for clues on IED placement.

As the troops pushed south, Quiggle spotted a garden shed and told his men to search it. They found RPG warheads, rocket motors, and other weapons. Quiggle decided to destroy it. He cleared the airspace, contacted Pope about his plans, and got his men under cover. His attached Air Force EOD team then set explosives and detonated the cache. The huge explosion destroyed the building and knocked down walls. A rocket motor that had not been destroyed spun towards the men. "Nothing will get your blood pumping like having an EOD tech running away from the scene of an explosion, screaming 'Get down!'" recalled Quiggle.⁸² The motor had not been armed with a warhead and did not detonate. The weapons cache was now nothing but a huge crater. Later, Pope's men found an IED placed eye-level in a gate between fields, which the EOD team also detonated. Both groups also discovered medical supplies. Pope's men found the supplies hanging in bags from trees, while Quiggle's men found a Taliban medical aid station.⁸³ At the end of the day, both Pope and Quiggle set up observation posts on the tops of buildings around their positions.

By the next morning, 4 September, supplies were running low. The men were down to one MRE per day and a bottle of water. Nevertheless, they pushed on, clearing buildings, fields and orchards. Bravo Soldiers encountered goat herders and families who offered no information about

insurgents. As the sun went down, the men occupied several empty compounds for the night. Pope and Quiggle spent the night sharing lessons learned.⁸⁴

On the morning of 5 September, the two units headed out again, finding only small arms caches. Quiggle radioed the TAC at 1500, asking Major O'Connor if he wanted Alpha Troop to continue clearing south. O'Connor said no. "I think you're done at this point."⁸⁵ With that, Quiggle maneuvered his unit to the river, where the cavalrymen mounted their waiting Strykers and left the area. As the operation drew to a close, Lieutenant Colonel Neumann moved the TAC upriver about three kilometers to some high ground where he could have better overall communications with his entire battalion. He then decided on a culmination point for Bravo Company and Lieutenant Colonel French's 2-1 IN.⁸⁶

Bravo Company finally linked up with a company from 2-1 IN south of Khosrow-e Olya. French's men turned a large compound over to Pope's 1st Platoon, which the men named COP Outlaw, and later, Patrol Base Brick One, to go along with Charlie Company's Brick Two in Shuyen-e Sofla. Before occupying the compound, Pope's men discovered and disarmed 18 surrounding IEDs. With the link-up accomplished, and two permanent positions established on the west bank of the Arghandab, Lieutenant Colonel Neumann called an end to OPPORTUNITY HOLD and recommended a change of mission to Colonel Tunnell.⁸⁷

Aftermath

By the time the nine-day operation came to an end, the men of the battalion were exhausted. When not engaging the enemy, they had spent their days walking, hunched over through overgrown pomegranate orchards. Their uniforms were in tatters. Most men wore out the crotches of their uniforms. To remedy the situation, many either used duct tape to patch holes, or just draped a t-shirt over the front of their belts. "But most of the people just largely didn't give a damn," said Lieutenant Boirum.⁸⁸ The men hadn't bathed in days, save the times they waded through canals and with water in such short supply the men hadn't shaved either. They looked as hard as they had fought.⁸⁹

The operation cost one more American life. Upon returning to FOB Frontenac, Alpha Troop's Staff Sergeant Robert Gordon felt ill and reported to the Troop Medical Clinic. Originally diagnosed with food poisoning, Gordon actually suffered from Crimean-Congo hemorrhagic fever, a rare disease spread by ticks.⁹⁰ He went into a coma and was flown to the Army's Regional Medical Center in Landstuhl, Germany, where he died on 16 September 2009.⁹¹

The 1-17th completed its assigned mission in OPPORTUNITY HOLD – the battalion now had several combat outposts in the Arghandab. They had established a foothold in enemy territory. The operation also had an important psychological effect on the battalion’s Soldiers. The losses of Tom, Yanney, and Captain Hallett’s Stryker crew during BUFFALO STAMPEDE had hurt morale. However, OPPORTUNITY HOLD’s offensive nature, characterized by fighting the enemy, destroying weapons caches, and aiding civilians, reminded the men of what they were there for. “It got us back in the fight,” said Major Jennings.⁹²

Endnotes

1. Lieutenant Colonel Jonathan Neumann, e-mail to Kevin M. Hymel, Combat Studies Institute, Fort Leavenworth, KS, 2 January 2013.
2. Major Ryan O'Connor, interview by Kevin M. Hymel, Combat Studies Institute, Fort Leavenworth, KS, 16 April 2012, 32.
3. Major Darren Jennings, interview by Kevin M. Hymel, Combat Studies Institute, Fort Leavenworth, KS, 19 July 2012, 63.
4. Lieutenant Colonel Jonathan Neumann, interview by Kevin M. Hymel, Combat Studies Institute, Fort Leavenworth, KS, 20 April 2012, 53; Zangenburg, interview by Kevin M. Hymel, Combat Studies Institute, Fort Leavenworth, KS, 17 April 2012, 26; Kovalsky, Combat Studies Institute, Fort Leavenworth, KS, 22 March 2012, 2; Jennings, interview, 63. Favor, interview, 32.
5. Neumann, interview, 56, 57, 58, 59; O'Connor, interview, 16 April 2012, 35.
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Chapter 5

Conclusion

OPPORTUNITY HOLD had an immediate impact on security in the Arghandab River valley. The new COPs established in Shuyen-e Sofla and Khosrow-e Olya allowed for periodic patrols by small units and increased contact by Coalition and Afghan security force leaders with local Afghans. Better relations led to the discovery of weapons caches, IEDs, and a reduction in firefights. After OPPORTUNITY HOLD, operations mounted from the two newly established OPs frustrated the insurgents and enabled Coalition forces to seize the initiative. Insurgent radio transmissions intercepted by the Coalition revealed a steep decline in enemy morale, with Taliban commanders in the district asking their superiors in Pakistan for permission to withdraw early, before the fighting season ended.¹ More than one insurgent commander was relieved of command. “We think most of the [senior] leadership actually [exfiltrated],” explained Major O’Connor, “and left their lower leaders there to fight it out.”²

There were other signs of success. People began moving back into the empty villages along the Arghandab. During the four months following OPPORTUNITY HOLD, Coalition-sponsored agriculture programs hired more than 3000 residents of the district. The US Agency for International Development (USAID) completed 18 projects in the area. Some local residents joined a program that gave villagers an active role in defending their homes alongside Afghan security forces.³ The *Buffaloes* now had a foothold in the Arghandab. The enemy that remained, however, continued to engage patrols and plant IEDs. Battalion leaders countered these actions by paying local Afghans for information on the locations of the devices. “It’s better to buy it than step on it,” explained Captain Pope, who after OPPORTUNITY HOLD did not lose another man to an IED.⁴

Out of the Arghandab

In mid-November, Regional Command-South changed 5/2 Stryker’s mission. Consequently, Colonel Tunnell shifted 1-17 IN from the Arghandab to the districts of Tarin Kot and Shah Wali Kot to the north. The *Buffaloes*’ new mission was to secure the major roadways between Kandahar and the city of Tarin Kot, some 100 road kilometers north of FOB Frontenac. British Lieutenant General Sir Nicholas Patrick Carter, the commander of RC-South who had replaced Dutch Major General Mart de Kruif, sent 2d Battalion, 508th Infantry (2-508 IN), 82d Airborne Division, into the Arghandab. Carter felt light infantry was better suited for the confined terrain of the Arghandab while Strykers, with their tactical

mobility and their capability to transport and dismount Soldiers quickly, were the logical fit for the open terrain that characterized the Shah Wali Kot District. “What a Stryker Brigade brings you, in terms of capability, is ... tactical mobility,” explained General Carter. “It gives you firepower and, critically, it gives you connectivity across the brigade in a way that’s almost unsurpassed in terms of any of our armies.”⁵

Because 1-17 IN moved into Shah Wali Kot in late Fall, it had an advantage over the insurgency in that district. As usual, the Taliban significantly scaled back its activities during the winter. That allowed the *Buffaloes* time to shape the battlefield and become familiar with the human terrain in the district. The battalion established a combat outpost near the district center and vehicle patrol bases (VPBs) along Route BEAR (Highway 617) to establish freedom of movement on that key road, conducted numerous shuras with local Afghan leaders, and generally familiarized itself with its new area of responsibility.

In May 2010, intelligence collection efforts indicated the enemy planned to overrun an American base along Route BEAR in the Shah Wali Kot’s Baghtu Valley, 45 kilometers north of FOB Frontenac. To counter the enemy’s plans, Neumann and his staff planned Operation BLOW FISH, a spoiling attack designed to take the fight to the insurgents massing near one of the battalion’s main patrol bases. For three days, the *Buffaloes* mauled insurgents east of Route BEAR, preventing them from assaulting the patrol base.

At the close of that operation, 1-17 IN’s tour of duty in Afghanistan came to an end. The unit’s deployment had taken a significant toll on the men of the battalion. By the end of its tour, the battalion had suffered 66 Soldiers wounded in action and 21 Soldiers killed in action.⁶ The worst incident occurred in October 2009 near the town of Jeleran where a massive 18,000-pound IED detonated under a Stryker from Charlie Company killing 7 Soldiers. Two other fatalities occurred during the 1-17 IN’s time in Afghanistan: Staff Sergeant Robert Gordon, who died from Crimean-Congo hemorrhagic fever; and Sergeant Antony Paci, who was killed in a vehicle roll-over. To help Soldiers cope with the losses, the battalion chaplain set up a tent with a buffalo painted on it at FOB Frontenac. Inside was a photo of each fallen Soldier and a place for visitors to kneel and reflect.⁷

BUFFALO STAMPEDE and OPPORTUNITY HOLD in Retrospect

In conducting Operations BUFFALO STAMPEDE and OPPORTUNITY HOLD, the Soldiers of 1-17 IN successfully accomplished their goals of providing security at the polls and establishing a Coalition foothold in the Arghandab River Valley. This success, however, was not achieved without significant difficulties including the casualties suffered by the battalion. Yet any objective assessment of these two operations must consider the larger context. The most important factor shaping that context was the timing of BUFFALO STAMPEDE. Senior Coalition leaders directed 5/2 Stryker to begin that operation within weeks of arriving in Afghanistan. The unit made first contact with the enemy only days after consolidating at its new forward operating base. “We were in contact from day one,” explained Lieutenant Colonel Neumann, “and we were in sustained contact for a long time.”⁸ For many of the young Soldiers and junior leaders, the deployment to Kandahar Province was their first combat tour. The extremely limited time available to 1-17’s soldiers to become accustomed to the new area of operation before BUFFALO STAMPEDE, however, was a challenge for even the most experienced Soldiers. “We got there one day and then headed out ten days later,” said Major Jennings. “That’s really not enough time to get your feet wet.”⁹ Even when BUFFALO STAMPEDE ended, the unit was still familiarizing itself with the terrain and the people. “There were an awful lot of things that we were still discovering,” explained Lieutenant Colonel Neumann.¹⁰

Compounding the challenges posed by the timeline was the fact that 1-17 IN was part of the first Stryker brigade to operate in Afghanistan. While previous deployments of Stryker brigades in Iraq had helped refine general techniques and procedures of Stryker-equipped units, the Afghan setting offered a unique set of political, military, social, and cultural challenges. Moreover, the *Buffaloes* had been given an area of operation that included the Arghandab Valley. The terrain of that district - a densely vegetated region of fields and orchards crisscrossed by mud walls - posed a nearly insurmountable mobility challenge for a unit built around its Stryker vehicles. Far more critical, however, was the fact that this area was the base for hundreds of well-armed and committed insurgents. By many measures, it was one of the most dangerous districts in Afghanistan.

1-17 IN's operations in the Arghandab and the Shah Wali Kot offer more than just a compelling narrative of one battalion's experience in Afghanistan. These actions also reveal key insights about how the unit's organization, doctrine, equipment, and technology – as well as the insurgent enemy – shaped the *Buffaloes* campaign in fall 2009.

Organization & Doctrine

The Army had established Stryker units based on the need for a medium infantry-centric unit that achieved balance between lethality, survivability, and mobility. These units had to be able to deploy by air relatively quickly and would rely on advanced digital technologies to gain and retain the initiative over any adversary. The doctrinal mission of a Stryker battalion like 1-17 IN was straightforward: close with the enemy by fire and movement to destroy or capture him or to repel his assault by fire, close combat, and counterattack.¹¹ The doctrine also emphasized mobility as the key to the Stryker battalion's success, stating that the Stryker vehicle allowed the battalion to maintain effectiveness in complex terrain and made it possible to conduct noncontiguous combat operations at the platoon- and company-levels.

In these operations, company leaders would rely on dismounted infantry elements to destroy the enemy. The inclusion of the Mobile Gun System (MGS) platoon and the Mortar section in the Stryker infantry company greatly enhanced the company commander's ability to employ organic direct and indirect fires in support of dismounted maneuver. The Stryker vehicle itself could also provide fire support to dismounted infantry but doctrine emphasized the vehicle's role in moving forces quickly to the fight and providing tactical flexibility.

In BUFFALO STAMPEDE and OPPORTUNITY HOLD, 1-17 IN's organization and operations generally conformed with well-established practices regarding the simultaneous employment of mounted and dismounted infantry. Overall, unit Soldiers were impressed with the vehicles. "You can run 50 miles an hour across the desert when nobody else can keep up with you," said Staff Sergeant Prince.¹² First Lieutenant Boirum noted. "The amount of firepower and infantry that [the carriers] can put on the table and the air-guard hatches and RWSs (Remote Weapons Systems), make that an unstoppable vehicle in a shootout."¹³

In both operations, there were moments when the carriers played a significant role. During BUFFALO STAMPEDE, the Stryker's firepower was telling in the assault on the village of Buyana in the open terrain of the Shah Wali Kot district. The massing of fires from the vehicle coupled

with the maneuver of dismounted elements forced an experienced insurgent force to retreat from the village. More decisive was 1-17 IN's use of the carrier during OPPORTUNITY HOLD. In the second phase of the operation, the battalion staff saw an opportunity to use the Stryker's mobility to surprise the insurgents in the village of Ali Kalay. Using the cover of night, a cavalry troop and an infantry platoon moved down the Arghandab riverbed and assaulted Ali Kalay while a dismounted infantry force attacked the village from the opposite side. The maneuver caught the insurgents unprepared. Unable to escape the assault, they became decisively engaged in a battle that raged for several more days, during which the Stryker carriers provided heavy fires in support of dismounted elements. Ultimately, the *Buffaloes*' success against the Taliban in the Ali Kalay region of the Arghandab allowed the battalion to establish a combat outpost from which they mounted follow-on operations.

The Arghandab Valley, however, was not ideal terrain for Stryker units. The many densely-planted orchards, stone walls, and narrow roads hindered the carriers' utility. In at least one case during BUFFALO STAMPEDE, orchards prevented the carriers from directly supporting the maneuver of a platoon from Bravo Company. The platoon had to leave Soldiers to secure the carriers before it began dismounted movement, decreasing the combat power available for the maneuver element. OPPORTUNITY HOLD placed Bravo and Charlie companies in a similar situation, requiring their infantrymen to move dismounted through very complex terrain without direct support of the carriers.

In the wake of OPPORTUNITY HOLD, with so many Strykers unable to penetrate the Arghandab Valley's Green Zone or traverse the area's narrow roads, Neumann tried to retain the mobility offered by the carriers by removing the slat armor from some of the Strykers in Bravo and Charlie companies. The slat armor had made the Strykers broader, adding 18 inches to each side of the vehicles. Because enemy RPG fire was considered too inaccurate, the removal of the slat armor was considered a reasonable risk. Neumann left the slat armor on Alpha Company's Strykers because the Shah Wali Kot district offered the insurgents better fields of fire where RPGs would be more effective. Without the slat armor, the Strykers had an easier time maneuvering through the Arghandab River Valley.¹⁴

In retrospect, no military vehicle designed to carry men into battle would have proven completely suitable for use in the Arghandab Valley, much like the difficulties faced by tracked armored vehicles in the jungles of Vietnam. However, the *Buffaloes* learned how to maximize the vehicles' value by using the high mobility corridors like riverbeds (wadis) and open

desert to move forces quickly. “When we started going across the desert and going through the wadis the [Strykers] did pretty well,” explained Staff Sergeant Michael Brown.¹⁵ For Lieutenant Colonel Neumann, the carriers’ ability to place dismounted infantrymen in position to begin decisive maneuver was the vehicle’s most important capability: “Strykers in the Arghandab for us were a platform to get us to a dismount point. We would swing wide in the desert, try to approach somewhere that we would then dismount, come ... from the desert where maybe they wouldn’t expect us.”¹⁶ Despite these tactics, as noted above, the decision to move 1-17 IN out of the Arghandab Valley in late fall 2009 resulted partly from the realization that the terrain in the valley did not allow the *Buffaloes* to take full advantage of their vehicles’ mobility and firepower.

Equipment and Technology

While the Stryker vehicle offered 1-17 IN a significant amount of tactical mobility, the *Buffaloes* also found that they could become a liability. In multiple cases, vehicle recovery became a major tactical operation. In training the battalion’s Soldiers had always towed damaged Strykers with Stryker Recovery Vehicles, using tow bars to connect vehicles. In Afghanistan, they dealt with overturned vehicles, vehicles without tires, and vehicles on fire. After relying on the Canadians for vehicle recovery, Major Jennings eventually obtained a flat-bed truck and wrecker, and trained some of his maintenance personnel in their use.¹⁷ Despite this, recovery usually took 24 hours. The enemy almost invariably targeted the Americans securing an inoperable Stryker, forcing them to fight a defensive battle. A damaged Stryker fixed a unit in place until it could be recovered. Like a beacon, a Stryker on fire at night invited enemy attack. Lieutenant Colonel Neumann told the helicopter pilots supporting 1-17 IN that they needed to treat a damaged Stryker like a downed pilot. “You need to come running with helicopters,” he told them, “and you need to stay with us until we get those vehicles loaded on a truck and we drive away.”¹⁸

The Land Warrior system helped Soldiers maneuver across the battlefields and allowed them to pinpoint friendly units.¹⁹ When Captain Pope mistakenly almost called mortars onto his own location, the battalion was able to check his position with Land Warrior and prevent a catastrophe. “Despite how heavy and awkward it was to wear, this incident sold me on the benefits of Land Warrior System,” explained Lieutenant Colonel Neumann.²⁰ The men, however, did not like the device’s weight or short battery life. When the *Buffaloes* first arrived in country, the extra batteries were lost, leaving the men to carry their systems around for days without power. The system also stuck out about six inches from a Soldier’s back

and chest. When combined with other equipment, entering and exiting Strykers' hatches became difficult.²¹

The system was never designed to provide perfect situational awareness of terrain or enemy dispositions. When Captain Pope used it to flank the enemy at Shuyen-e Sofla, for example, the maps could not detect enemy barricades, impeding his scheme of maneuver. Despite this well-known and accepted limitation, Land Warrior had other maddening flaws. When the system was not run down from overuse, for example, it still might turn off at inconvenient times. In one case during OPPORTUNITY HOLD, the Land Warrior equipment shut down on the men of Chosin Company's 2d Platoon while they were trying to find 3d Platoon's position in the dark. "We couldn't see anything anymore," explained Specialist John Diaz, "nothing was on our screens, nothing whatsoever."²² At least some of these problems were caused by Land Warrior's design as a line-of-sight system. Major terrain features and distances blocked or degraded its signal, a tremendous shortcoming in anything other than ideal terrain. Major Jennings contended that there might be a relatively straightforward solution to this shortcoming: "If it was satellite based, that would be ideal, because you would never be out of contact with your other personnel."²³

The Insurgency in Southern Afghanistan

Like most US Army maneuver units that deployed to Afghanistan, 1-17 IN conducted a campaign that combined non-lethal actions to further the legitimacy of the Afghan government (and its security forces) with lethal operations against insurgent forces. In the Shah Wali Kot and Arghandab districts of Kandahar Province, the campaign waged by the Soldiers of 1-17 IN leaned decisively toward lethal actions against a shadowy foe. The Stryker battalion certainly brought more firepower to the battlefield than the Taliban could muster. The insurgents responded by avoiding pitched firefights whenever possible. "They couldn't fight us in a small arms fight," explained Captain Joshua Glonek, "they had to defeat us with IEDs."²⁴ Especially in the Arghandab, the battlefield was heavily shaped by IEDs. The magnitude of the IED threat was made clear just days into the 1-17 IN's operations when an IED detonation flipped over Captain Hallet's Stryker. By the fall of 2009, insurgents in the Arghandab had enjoyed years of freedom to experiment with trigger systems and explosive charge sizes needed to catastrophically destroy a medium armored vehicle, an effort that started when Canadian forces began operating with LAVs in the valley in 2006. Medium armored vehicles may have been new to the US Army, but not to Afghanistan. The insurgents in Kandahar Province were able to create large IEDs partly because of their development of homemade

explosives (HME). This meant that the IEDs in Afghanistan were far more lethal to the Stryker vehicles than those encountered in Iraq.

Taliban IED tactics were very sophisticated, even if the devices themselves were not. The insurgents constantly came up with new ideas for IED placement, often in response the tactics and techniques used by the *Buffaloes*. Captain Glonek recalled, “every measure we would take to kind of counter something they were doing, they would come back with something else.”²⁵ Once the Americans had discerned a particular method of triggering, the enemy developed a new technique, such as placing pressure plates a few meters in front of an IED so a mine roller would pass over the explosives and trigger the pressure plate, detonating the bomb underneath the Stryker. Insurgents also learned to trigger IEDs in the middle of Stryker columns, where a commander was most likely be located.²⁶

The IED threat also affected dismounted tactics in significant ways. The *Buffaloes* began to question every path they took. They had to assume mines were planted at every choke point, every footpath, every gate, and every bridge. This often meant taking a less direct path over walls, through dense vegetation, or through canals, routes that exhausted the Soldiers in their heavy gear. Certainly, the IED threat disrupted maneuver. But the junior leaders in the battalion adapted quickly. As Lieutenant Colonel Neumann put it, much of the reaction was mental: “You’ve got to think: ‘What’s [the enemy] trying to stop me from doing? It’s not random. That’s what you unravel: what was the enemy trying to do?’”²⁷

Ultimately, the *Buffaloes* were impressed with the enemy. “The Taliban are trained fighters and they are good at what they do,” explained Staff Sergeant Brown.²⁸ The enemy, hardened and experienced from decades of war, understood the tactical advantages of ambushes and surprise attacks. “If you walk into a situation and you go ‘wow, this looks like a place for an L-shaped ambush,’ chances are the Taliban thought the same thing,” added Brown.²⁹ The enemy also demonstrated a commitment to quick evacuation of their wounded from the battlefield. “As soon as you hit someone they never wanted you to find their casualties or know how many people got hurt,” explained Staff Sergeant Colunga.³⁰ “As soon as the MK-19 [grenade launcher] was hitting people, they were picking up pieces or, right away the kids would come and pick the remains.”³¹ The children were only 13 or 14 years old, yet old enough to drag a grown man.³² Because of these actions and a more general respect for tenacity of the Taliban, there was no question in the minds of *Buffaloes* that they were pitted against a group of dedicated fighters, deeply committed to holding on to the Arghandab Valley.

The deployment of the 5th Brigade, 2d Infantry Division was a pivotal moment in the history of the campaign in Afghanistan. In the spring of 2009, the US Government had announced a troop increase in Afghanistan designed to oppose growing Taliban resistance. 5/2 Stryker was one of the first units designated as part of this surge. Not surprisingly, Coalition leaders decided to deploy the brigade in southern Afghanistan where the Taliban resurgence threatened the key city of Kandahar. Stryker brigades had proven themselves in Iraq and that experience suggested that 5/2 Stryker would be able to use their enhanced capabilities in speed, mobility, and situational awareness to gain the initiative against the Taliban. The two operations that began 1-17 IN's deployment in the Kandahar area showed both the potential and the limitations of the Stryker units. As this study shows, however, it was the adaptability, discipline, and courage of the battalion's Soldiers that made a difference against an implacable enemy defending some of the most difficult terrain in Afghanistan.

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Glossary

ANA	Afghan National Army
ANP	Afghan National Police
AO	Area of Operations
APCs	Armored Personnel Carriers
COP	Combat Outpost
DRA	Democratic Republic of Afghanistan
DUSTWUN	Duty Status Whereabouts Unknown
EOD	Explosive Ordnance Disposal
ESV	Engineer Squad Vehicle
FOB	Forward Operating Base
HHC	Headquarters and Headquarters Company
HLZ	Helicopter Landing Zone
HMMWV or Humvee	High Mobility Multipurpose Wheeled Vehicle
HUMINT	Human Intelligence
IEDs	Improvised Explosive Devices
ISAF	International Security Assistance Force
KAF	Kandahar Airfield
LAVs	Light Armored Vehicles
LRAS3	Long-Range Advanced Scout Surveillance System
MGS	Mobile Gun System
MICLICs	Mine Clearing Line Charges
MRAP	Mine Resistant Ambush Protected
NCO	Non-commissioned Officer
OMLT	Operational Mentor Liaison Teams (“omelet”)
OP	Observation Post
PA	Physician Assistant
PID	Positive Identification
QRF	Quick Reaction Force
RCP	Route Clearance Package
RC-South	Regional Command-South
REDCON-1	Readiness Condition-1
RPGs	Rocket-Propelled Grenades
RSTA	Reconnaissance, Surveillance and Target Acquisition
RTO	Radio Telephone Operator
SAW	Squad Automatic Weapon

SBCT	Stryker Brigade Combat Team
SLLS	Stop, Look, Listen and Smell
TAC	Tactical Command Post
TOC	Tactical Operations Center

About the Author

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