

# TAKING THE GREEN ZONE

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Private Travis Nicholson, 2RAR Mortar Platoon, prepares for night firing as Afghan National Police conduct evening prayers - Pic Corporal Hamish Paterson

t's early spring 2008, close to the Baluchi Pass in southern Afghanistan. Australian infantry, providing security to engineers building a patrol base, are out of their pits and moving. 7 Platoon, Charlie Company, 2RAR – the Unforgiven – are on patrol. Only days ago, Charlie Company backed by cavalry, bushmasters and mortars, fought the enemy to a standstill here in a series of defensive actions that saw the entire battle group dig in. 9 Platoon – the Bad Tourists – took the brunt of the first attack and 7 Platoon repelled the final assault. The Taliban extremists had, as the official account said, 'rolled the dice and lost'.

Today, Lieutenant Ben Watson is pushing his troops hard before they pull out and return to Australia after a tough six-month rotation. They patrolled last night, they patrolled this morning, they'll patrol again tonight – and they're patrolling now.

In denying enemy the initiative and freedom of movement, they're doing what Australians have done on defensive operations since WWI – dominating the operating environment.

For the Unforgiven, that's nothing new. They spent the winter securing the high reaches of the Chora Valley through the harshest conditions in living memory, according to the locals, while the Taliban extremists laid low, enabling the Aussie engineers and locals to build Forward Operating Base Locke, right in the face of an enemy reluctant to fight.



**FLEXIBILITY IS A BIG PLUS AND AUSSIE PATROLS CAN OPERATE EITHER UNSEEN OR WITH DELIBERATELY HIGH VISIBILITY**

**T**oday, the almond trees are in blossom and, under the warm spring sunshine, the soldiers are relaxed yet alert. Multiple patrols through the area have helped strengthen relationships. The locals are familiar and relaxed with the troops, impressed when the diggers call them by name and practice the local Pashto language. And the kids are giving cheek as they dance around the soldier's feet.

Later that day, there's a Shura or local meeting, where elders are shown respect and asked for their opinions, asked to voice their needs. It's evidence of Australians demonstrating their competitive advantage over the Taliban extremists – consultation over intimidation. What every single Australian on the ground here knows, is that the consultation is backed up by the ability to fight and win, if required.

Australian protected reconstruction is making real progress. The evidence speaks for itself.

In the past 12 months, Australians have driven a wedge into Taliban extremists' operations in the Baluchi and Chora Valleys – both former strongholds.

The catalyst for change began near the mouth of the Baluchi Valley in August last year when a massive battle broke out and resulted in the combined arms of the Dutch and Australian contingents checking the 'swarm' tactics of a large force of Taliban extremists. Although they probably didn't realise it at the time, and the world's media remained sceptical, the insurgents' days of dominating the Baluchi and Chora valleys were numbered.



Sergeant Lloyd Brandon and Lieutenant Ben Watson survey the Chora Valley

A NATO force, centred on British Gurkhas, drove the Taliban out before winter set in, on an operation called Spin Ghar, in October 2007. The pessimistically held view then was that the Taliban would be back stronger than ever with the spring.

However, the fact that Taliban extremists were not able to re-establish was largely thanks to the Australian tactic of rapid construction of a series of patrol bases, protected by active infantry patrolling.

What's remarkable about this is that, given the impact, Australian infantry have operated in incredibly small numbers. Australia's Reconstruction Task Force (RTF) infantry component has never mounted to more than a company of around a 100 men, backed by indirect fire, bushmasters, engineers and cavalry.

At time of writing, it is August – six months after my patrol with the Unforgiven. Infantry-led patrols by 3RAR now dominate the once impenetrable Baluchi Valley. This has forced the enemy, when they do risk contact, to do so from beyond the effective limits of their weapon systems.

Flexibility is a big plus and Aussie patrols can operate either unseen or with deliberately high visibility, to work as a deterrent to the enemy or as a confidence builder for local populations and security forces. The enemy is also kept off balance by other assets, such as mortars, targeting possible enemy positions on the ridges.

Sniper Corporal Shane Brown explained that even elements that would usually remain invisible on a conventional battlefield can change their role to meet a tactical aim in insurgency operations.

"At times, we create an overt presence, designed to put the enemy off coming near our forces, in line with our mission as security for the RTF," he said.

Equally, the infantry can remain unseen to achieve the same end, particularly, as 2RAR's Lieutenant Tex Burton observed, when dominating night operations.

"We were able to manoeuvre ourselves in the pitch black with just about zero illumination to secure our lines of communication, and so, not allow the Taliban forces to advance on our defensive positions," he said.

The strategy employed by the Australian Reconstruction Task Force reflects their grasp of what exactly characterises key terrain in Oruzgan Province.

Revolving around fertile river valleys, known as the green zones, it is no coincidence that key terrain for the Aussies is where populations are centred. In a counter insurgency, the 'human terrain' is what matters, and this is where the infantry operate.

A wide river-irrigated zone known as the Dorafshan leads into the narrow Baluchi Valley, which in turn joins the Chora Valley. In the past, this river was dominated and transited by the Taliban – it is also one of the purported routes of the fabled Silk Road.

The river valley system also marks the location of some of the Australian Army's most heroic actions in the modern era. It was on a ridge above the Chora Valley, for



Sergeant Lloyd Brandon addresses soldiers at a forward operating base - Pic Corporal Hamish Paterson

example, that SAS Sergeant Matthew Locke won his Medal for Gallantry in 2006 when Taliban made repeated attempts by day and night to overrun and surround his position.

Two years on and the evidence indicates the Australian strategy of patrol-base development, coupled with active patrolling by infantry, has displaced the Taliban, forcing their estrangement from local populations – as Lieutenant Andrew Wegener observed.

"Through constant engagement, listening and acting on local needs, we develop a rapport that makes the Taliban the outsiders, rather than us," he said.

Consistent feedback confirms this, indicating Taliban in the area are having problems maintaining credibility and cohesion, with infighting and blame for failures that has led to a breakdown in morale.

The Australians have proven the Taliban extremists are not the united and invincible force as sometimes portrayed by the media and by the enemy's own information operations.

"They have just as many difficulties staying onside with local populations as anyone else," Officer Commanding the Security Task Group (STG) with RTF-3 Major Michael Bassingthwaite said.

It's a significant advance. In the past, Taliban have simply reinfiltred areas cleared during counterinsurgency operations. Again, the evidence indicates that, in the Green Zone, the clear hold-and-build strategy has proven successful.

These areas are of key strategic importance. Yet the remarkable thing is that these results have been achieved without vast numbers of infantry.

Adaptation to an evolving operating environment has seen a change in structure in the Australian force. This includes mentoring teams embedded with the Afghan Army to assist it to steadily take responsibility for security.

Enhanced security will also create



Corporal Jarred 'Bingo' Bingham and Private Damien Brown conduct night routine - Pic Corporal Hamish Paterson



Spring is in the air as Aussie soldiers patrol in Oruzgan Province - Pic Captain Al Green



conditions that will allow aid agencies to operate in the region with reduced risk. Until now these agencies have been reluctant to operate in Oruzgan, but AusAid is one of the first to venture into the area to work closely with the RTF.

The complexity of counterinsurgency operations in this highly sensitive operating environment means skill, judgement and communication ability is critically important to every soldier charged with providing security.

So what makes the Australian infantry soldier suitable for this complex environment that can see the soldier as a combat fighter one minute or peacemaker the next? How has a relatively small infantry component within the battle group helped transform security in the Dorashan, Baluchi and Chora Valleys?

The military aspects are fairly straight forward. For Major Michael Bassingthwaite, the combined-arms approach is the best way to achieve the mission.

"The infantry, as a vital part of that approach, is key in seeking out, closing with and engaging the enemy in terrain that is not suitable for any other arms."

"So, the advantage we had and the approach we took with the Security Task Group, was using the elements of the task group for what was best suited to their strengths."

The infantry under Major Bassingthwaite's command operated, dismounted, in the Green Zone where the terrain was extremely complex in both an urban sense and a close-terrain sense, almost to jungle thickness in places, and with those engagement limits.

Calvary provided fire support and screening operations over large areas and engineers enabled mounted mobility as well as key search capabilities in the exploitation of caches identified by the infantry patrol.

"Additionally, fire support provided by the

## "EVEN IN DEFENCE, BY ACTIVE PATROLLING AND SURVEILLANCE, WE STILL DOMINATED OUR AREA OF OPERATIONS"

joint terminal attack controllers and joint forward observers from artillery, and the mortars from infantry, helped us make best use of the combined-arms effect," he said.

"So, by maximising our strengths and minimising our weaknesses within the combat team construct, we created an advantage over the enemy on the battlefield."

Major Bassingthwaite said that every encounter with the enemy reinforced the value of doctrine.

"Doctrine works. Sometimes what's forgotten is that doctrine, developed over many years of operational experience. What we found was that, more often than not, established doctrine was reinforced during operations in Afghanistan."

Examples he cited included establishing defence-in-depth to protect worksites – going as far as to dig in armoured vehicles for protection against rocket-propelled grenades.

"In the Dorashan area, we had the whole combat team dug-in in area defence, which was something I don't think the Australian Army has done in quite a while."

"Even in defence, by active patrolling and surveillance, we still dominated our area of operations."

While the soldiers of Charlie Company trained effectively within a combined-arms construct before leaving Australia, they also worked hard on basic soldiering skills. To hone them, Major Bassingthwaite took his company to the jungles of North Queensland. While this may seem a strange choice of location for training in preparation



for Afghanistan, it turned out to be ideal grounding for what lay ahead.

"Company training in the jungle at Tully really got the soldiers thinking about developing basic skills, working as a section in that close environment," Major Bassingthwaite said.

"A lot of people think of key terrain in a battle as large features – but what Tully really teaches is that it's the micro terrain that really counts in a firefight."

"What the infantry brings to the battlefield is the ability to control that micro-terrain and take the enemy on in its own environment."

Added to their tactical prowess, junior commanders had another advantage that gave them the flexibility to deal with complex operations – that of mission command.

Lieutenant Tex Burton credits this approach to aiding his platoon's development, particularly at the junior-leader level.

"The best thing about leading a platoon in Afghanistan was the freedom of action I

was given by my company commander, passing those freedoms to the corporals and watching them grow as junior leaders while developing their own soldiers into better operators all 'round,' he said.

The soldiers' innate ability to adapt to rapidly evolving operating environments also points to strong individual character traits. To capture this in words I return to the notes I scribbled while on patrol with the Unforgiven on that perfect day last spring near the mouth of the Baluchi Pass.

Bravery is almost an irrelevance to them – it's assumed, just as putting a mate's welfare before their own is assumed. Speaking to the soldiers themselves they don't seem to see their actions as particularly remarkable. Rounds hitting the dirt around them, cutting through uniforms and smashing into packs are events shrugged off or talked about as a matter of fact. So, too, are stories of endurance in temperature extremes that drive the Taliban to retreat while the diggers persevere, giving them the psychological edge and impressing a local population not easily impressed.

They are also undeterred by observers from afar who say the war is lost. The soldiers trust their mates, respect their competence, know they do their own job well and the locals are better off for it.

The diggers know better than anybody that security operations are not an end in themselves, but necessary to set the conditions for progress, to allow the aid agencies to return, for locals to work on projects unhindered, for health services to function and kids to get an education. They are, therefore, easily able to adapt from a battle focus a couple of days ago to today's patrol with its focus on building relationships. Their inherent fairness is their guide. In that context, the war is already being won.

