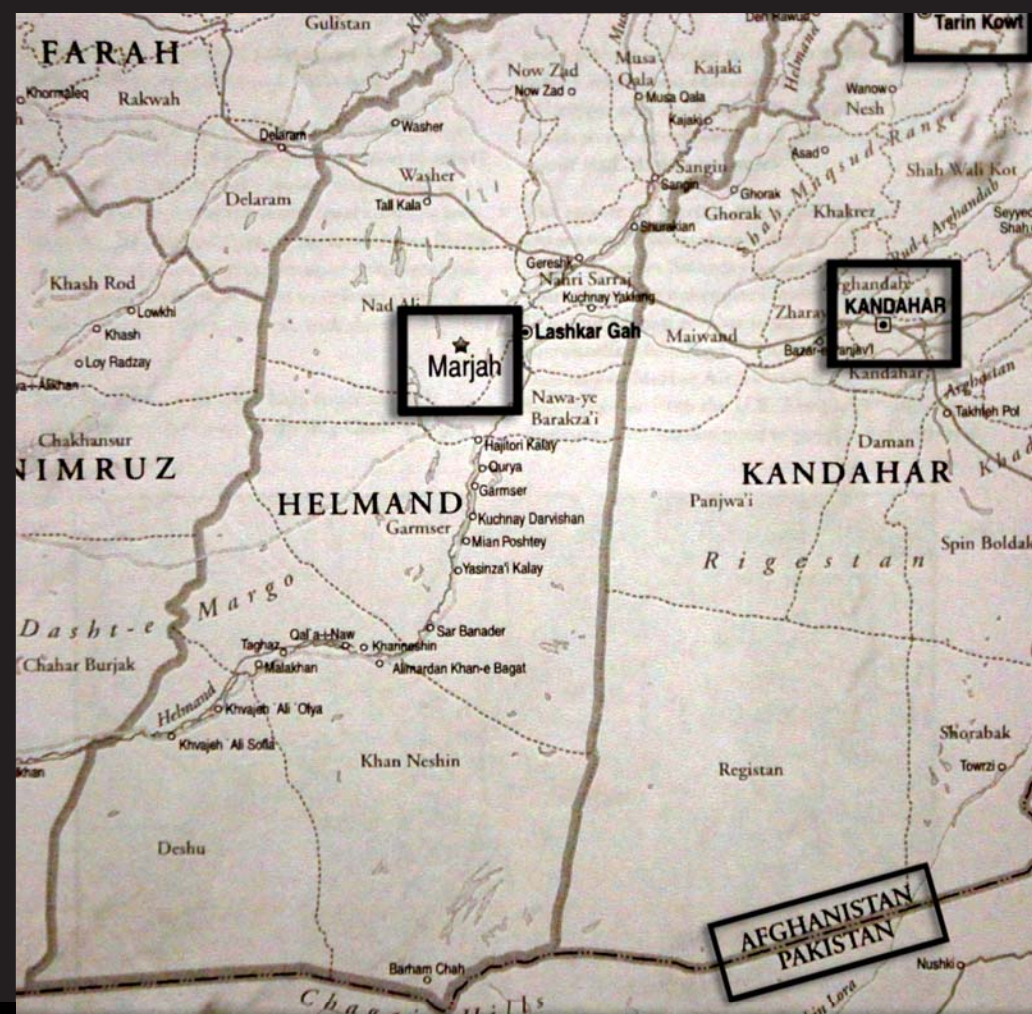


# A TOUGH YEAR IN

# AFGHANISTAN

WORDS AND PICS GARY RAMAGE

## part 1



The blood of Australian, United States, other coalition partners and Afghan forces continues to flow in the fields of Afghanistan's various war-torn provinces. Ten Australian soldiers have been killed this year alone – doubling the body count since the war began.

Helmand's lush green zones are the deadliest for coalition forces as they patrol on foot and in heavily armoured vehicles. The insurgents seem to have the ability to pick and choose their targets at will, especially by placing improvised explosive devices on main routes and small crossings, and taking an increasingly heavy toll – with more than half of all fatalities in the past three years caused by the insidious and indiscriminate IED.

Helmand has seen nearly 600 foreign-military deaths since the war began, compared to just over 60 KIAs in Uruzgan, where the Aussies are based.

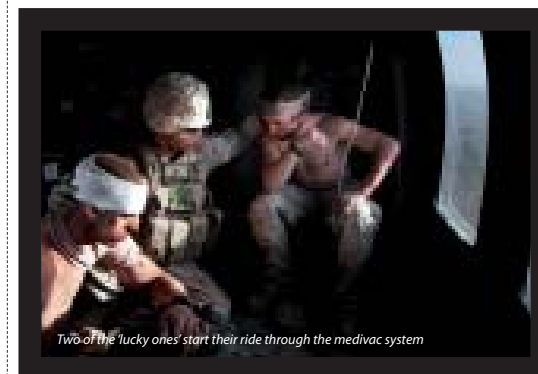
There is a small contingent of Aussies based in Helmand, attached to a British artillery unit but, thankfully, they have not suffered any casualties, despite being involved in "a scale of operations not seen since World War II" – according to the British Army's Master Gunner General Sir Timothy Granville-Chapman.

The town of Marjah is located 25 miles south-west from Helmand's main provincial capital, Lashkar Gah. The surrounding area is mainly flat, expansive farmland and was considered to be the main narcotics centre for Helmand province.

Marjah became a main International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) strategic target in February 2010, as it was a Taliban stronghold and the concentration point for opium networks. It became the first major offensive under President Barack Obama's regime. ISAF's operation was called Moshtarak, which means 'together' in the local Dari language.

Marjah was confirmed as the Taliban's main command and control centre for operations against ISAF forces in the province and they were intent on defending it – a Taliban spokesman saying they intended to use hit-and-run tactics, roadside bombs and IEDs against ISAF forces, as they had 'successfully' done elsewhere in the past. The main battle for Marjah commenced before dawn on Saturday 13 February 2010.

More than 60 helicopters inserted thousands of coalition forces into the area. By the end of the first day, US and



Two of the 'lucky ones' start their ride through the medivac system

Afghan forces had advanced into the town, controlling key intersections, government buildings and one of two bazaars.

Of the 400 suspected fighters in the town, one quarter were allegedly killed in the fighting. The rest apparently fled to the north and south across the border into Pakistan. During the Moshtarak operation about \$4 million worth of raw opium was discovered and more than 200kg of ammonium nitrate and other bomb-making materials seized.

Three months on, Captain Tony Sama, RCT7 Operations Area says the main supply route (MSR) – Route 68 – from Lashkar Gah to Marjah is primarily secure.

"We have not had an IED incident on that MSR for nearly two months," Captain Sama says.

"Hundreds of Afghan civilians now travel that road on a daily basis to collect their produce and supplies from shops and stalls in Lashkar Gah to sell at the local bazaars back in Marjah."