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# ***Strykers in Afghanistan***

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

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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.<sup>1</sup>

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

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mm gun for direct fire support.<sup>3</sup> 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 three 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.<sup>4</sup>



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

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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.<sup>6</sup>

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 markers in their helmet lenses and act accordingly.



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messaging, and downloadable maps with varying degrees of resolution.<sup>7</sup>

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."<sup>8</sup>

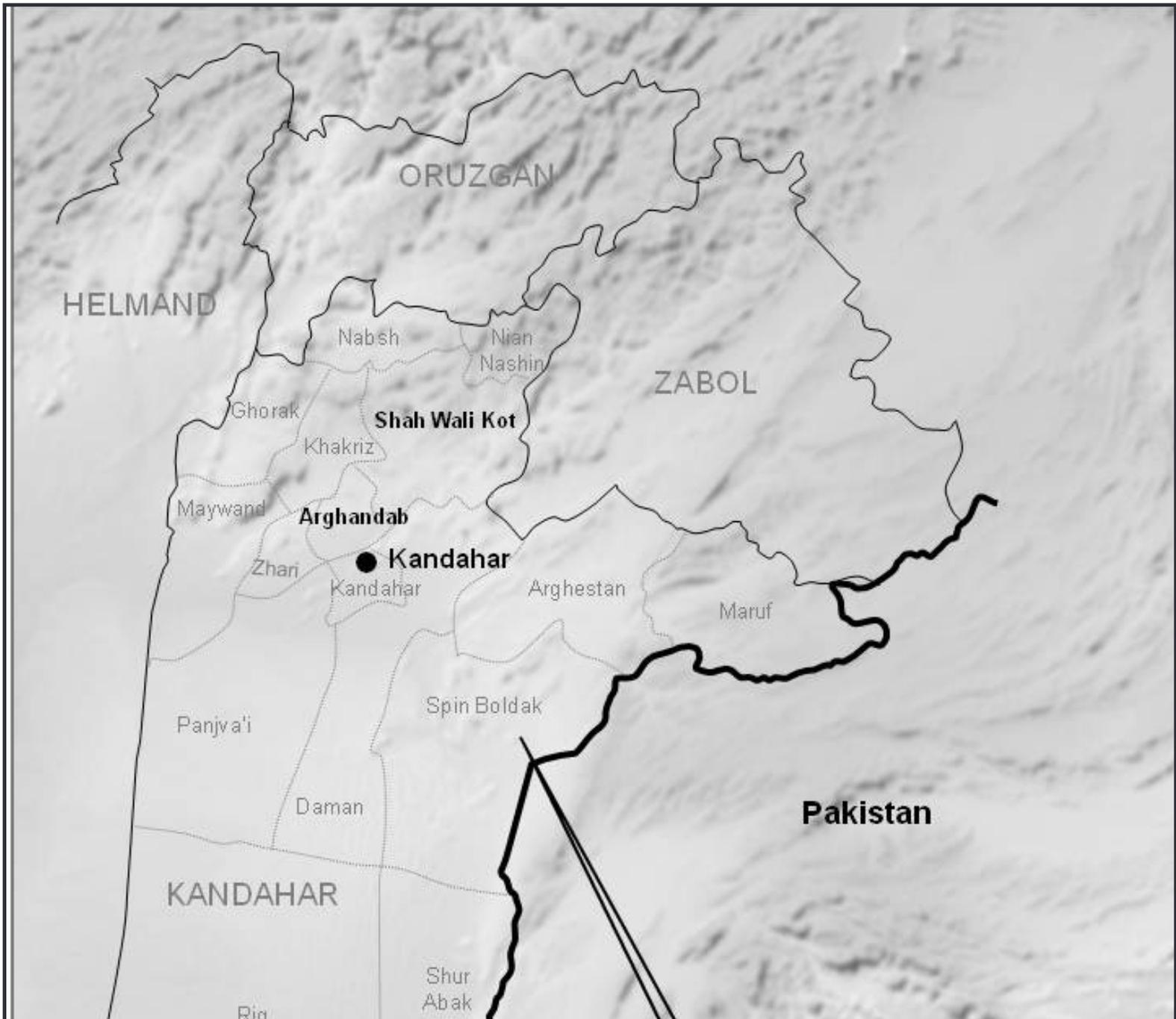
Strykers first saw combat when the 3d Stryker Brigade, 2d Infantry Division (3/2 Stryker), deployed to Iraq in December 2003. The brigade completed its trek from Kuwait to Iraq's Sunni Triangle without the use of the semi-trucks and flatbed heavy equipment transports used to move M1 Abrams tanks or Bradley 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

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While Stryker units performed well in Iraq, a new battlefeld 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.<sup>11</sup> 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."<sup>12</sup>

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

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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.

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## 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

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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.

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## 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

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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 Kakhroz District to the northwest, the Shah Wali

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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.<sup>3</sup>

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.

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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.<sup>5</sup>

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.<sup>6</sup> 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.<sup>7</sup>

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.<sup>8</sup> The Canadians did have one thing in common

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names. “Some are easy to find,” said Major Ryan O’Connor, the battalion operations officer, “others are almost impossible.”<sup>10</sup> 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.”<sup>11</sup>

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.<sup>12</sup> 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

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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.<sup>16</sup>

## **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.<sup>17</sup> 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.<sup>18</sup>

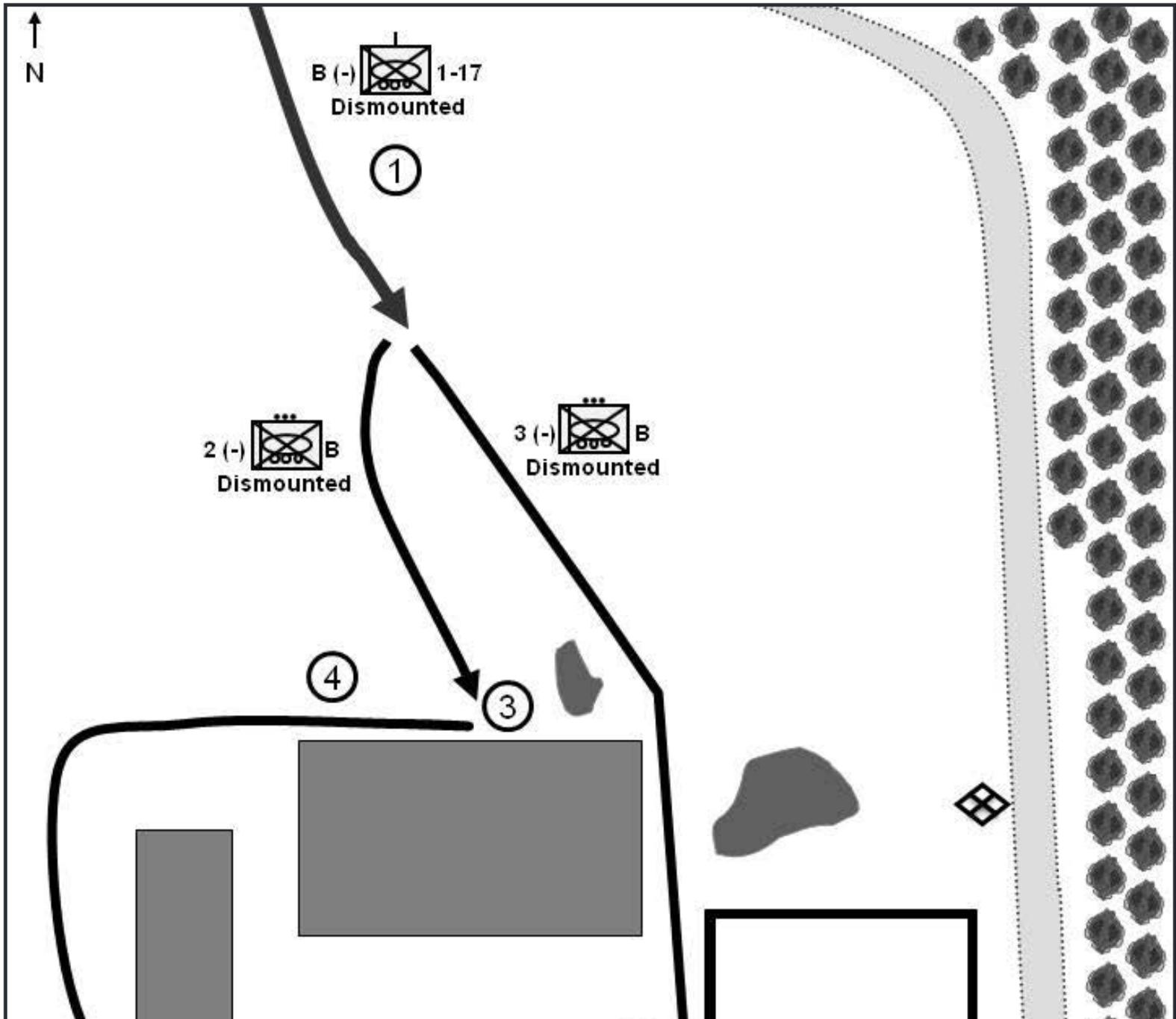
To ensure safe travel down Route BEAR, a route clearance platoon from the 562d Engineer Company—referred to as a Route Clearance Package (RCP)—preceded Bravo Company, checking for IEDs. The journey did not last long. Two hours into the mission, just outside the town of Shuyen-e SoÀa, the lead Engineer 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

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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.<sup>21</sup> 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.<sup>22</sup>

Boirum shouted for Berschinski to move up. The Soldiers behind him shouted to pull back. “No!” Boirum shouted, “Move up! Get on line!”<sup>23</sup> 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,

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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.

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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.<sup>28</sup>

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.<sup>29</sup>

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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.<sup>33</sup>

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.<sup>34</sup>

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## **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.<sup>35</sup> 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.<sup>36</sup>

The second Stryker immediately pulled up and dropped its ramp. Scouts and snipers poured out and set up a security perimeter while the

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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.<sup>40</sup> Between Bravo Company's engagement with the enemy in Shuyen-e SoÀa 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.<sup>41</sup>

Osborne dismounted and led a rifle squad into the town where he met

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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."<sup>45</sup> Swaing saw an insurgent crawling low by a house and fired grenades at him until the man stopped moving.<sup>46</sup>

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,

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

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.”<sup>55</sup> 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.<sup>56</sup>

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,

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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."<sup>59</sup> The men began searching the area and walking the canal looking for Tom. They only found ID tags and parts of his equipment.<sup>60</sup>

Meanwhile, First Lieutenant Berschinski's men had just dismounted their Strykers, passed through an empty Shuyen-e Soa 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

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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.”<sup>63</sup>

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.<sup>64</sup>

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



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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."<sup>74</sup> 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.<sup>75</sup>

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 fire 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

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surprised Pope but he could not send them back. “Night’s falling and I need to get into defensive positions,” he later explained.<sup>78</sup> 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.<sup>79</sup> 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.<sup>80</sup>

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

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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.<sup>84</sup>

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."<sup>85</sup> 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.<sup>86</sup>

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

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## 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 killed, not only killing the men but also setting off a weapons cache. "There were five minutes' [worth] of secondary explosions," said Prince.<sup>91</sup> 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.<sup>92</sup>

With Tom found, Pope could now concentrate his search for Private First Class Yanney. He knew the enemy had likely prepared for this

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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.<sup>96</sup>

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.<sup>97</sup> 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

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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.<sup>102</sup>

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."<sup>103</sup> For two years the unit had ended every battalion formation by reciting the Soldiers' Creed, which included the line: "I will never leave a

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48. 2d Infantry Division, 5th Stryker Brigade Combat Team, 17th Infantry, 1st Battalion, "Bronze Star Medal with Valor Citation, SGT Keith Brantley."

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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.<sup>1</sup>

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.<sup>2</sup> 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

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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 BFD 00C. As he returned to Jalapa, however, an IED

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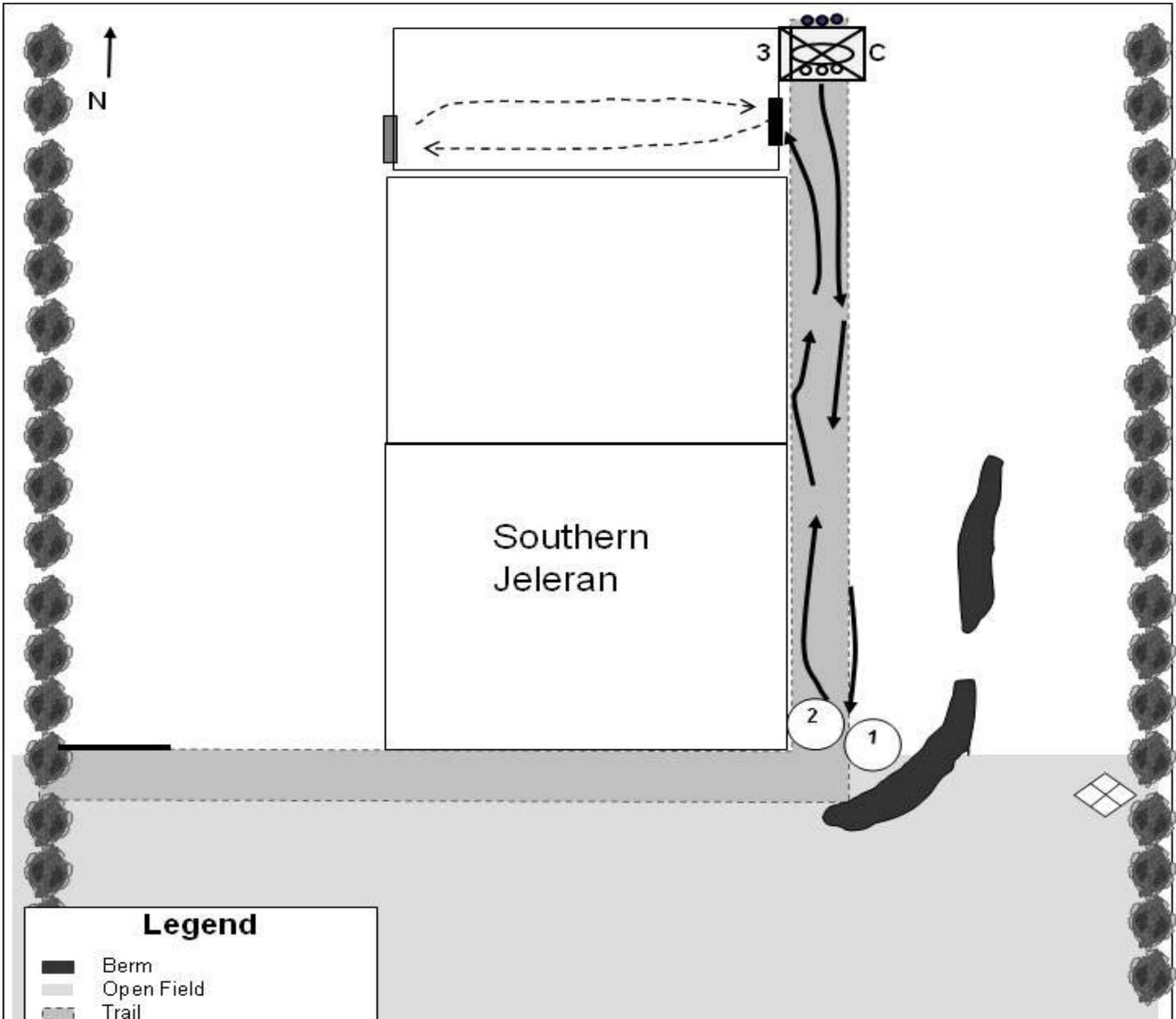
At battalion headquarters, the staff monitored updates, ready to send reinforcements to any site in the AO. Lieutenant Colonel Neumann's most important decision that day was not committing to any engagements and letting the Afghan Security Forces follow the plan of securing the polling sites. "We intended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

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.<sup>11</sup> 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."<sup>12</sup>

## **Ambush in Jeleran**

With the election over, the *Buffalos* continued to establish themselves in their AO. Lieutenant Colonel Neumann's leadership and BUFFALO

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carrying the fatigued Hill forward. “He was basically dragging [Hill] with him and shooting at the same time,” recalled Staff Sergeant Nikola Tersiev.<sup>14</sup> 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.”<sup>15</sup>

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.<sup>16</sup>

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.<sup>17</sup> 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.”<sup>18</sup>

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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).”<sup>22</sup> 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.<sup>23</sup> 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.”<sup>24</sup> 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.<sup>25</sup>

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## **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.<sup>28</sup> 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

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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.<sup>33</sup>

As Ames 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.<sup>34</sup>

When Lieutenant Colonel Neumann arrived on the scene with the ORF, Glonek took him aside and told him who was in the Stryker. "I was

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

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 to 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.<sup>40</sup> 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.<sup>41</sup>

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."<sup>42</sup> They also discovered holes the enemy had drilled into the road to place mortar shells. Swift and his men

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## 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 SoÀa south of Shuyen-e Olya, his men would establish the first outpost.<sup>1</sup>

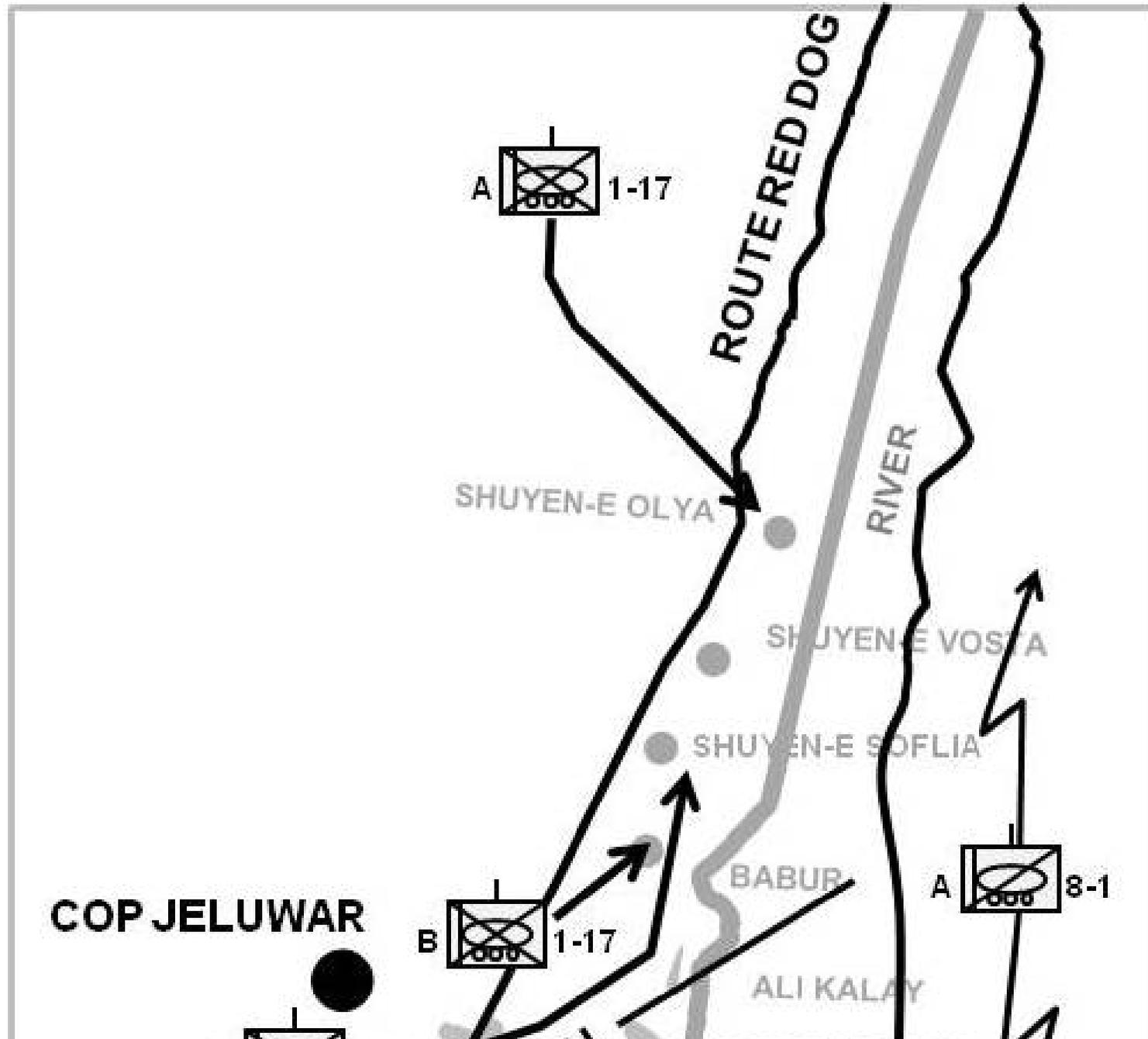
While Neumann's men combed through this area, Lieutenant Colonel Jeffrey French's 2d Battalion, 1st Infantry (2-1 IN), known as Task Force *Legion*, would keep the enemy busy to the southwest. French's battalion would attack from Nagahan, southwest of the Arghandab District Center, and drive northeast 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.<sup>2</sup> With the

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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 SoÀa, 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 Àee 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.<sup>5</sup>

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 inç ltration/exç ltration 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.<sup>6</sup>

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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.<sup>10</sup> 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.<sup>11</sup>



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was squeamish” he recalled but he had to stop the bleeding. Staff Sergeant Kenneth Rickman encouraged him, “You got it.”<sup>12</sup> 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.<sup>13</sup>

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

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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 Alex-cuffs, and handed them over to a human intelligence (HUMINT) unit for questioning. The detained men almost always claimed to be simple farmers.<sup>15</sup> 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.<sup>16</sup> 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.<sup>17</sup>

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

### **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.<sup>22</sup>

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

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were not pleasant. “[It was] just nasty, smells and got crabs,” said Sergeant Prince, “[but] it feels pretty good when its 130 degrees outside.”<sup>26</sup> 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 inserted 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.<sup>27</sup>



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oficer, 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.<sup>28</sup> Neumann’s staff questioned Pope’s need for mortars. “[Pope is] in a direct sight 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?”<sup>29</sup>

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.”<sup>30</sup> 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

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counterproductive, for them and for us,” Osborne later explained. “It can potentially put them in danger.”<sup>34</sup> 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.<sup>35</sup>

### **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 SoÀa 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 re. 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

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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.”<sup>37</sup>

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.<sup>38</sup>

## **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

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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 fight 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.”<sup>42</sup>

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 fight in the distance tapered off. “Whoever was playing was done for the night,” Swift later said.<sup>43</sup> 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.

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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.<sup>46</sup> 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.<sup>47</sup>

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

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balance. “We made it an unsafe area for them to operate,” said Neumann.<sup>49</sup> 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.”<sup>50</sup>

## **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 SoÅa. 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

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oficer, led the company's Strykers north, and then entered the river, driving south until they caught up with Alpha Troops' Strykers.<sup>54</sup>

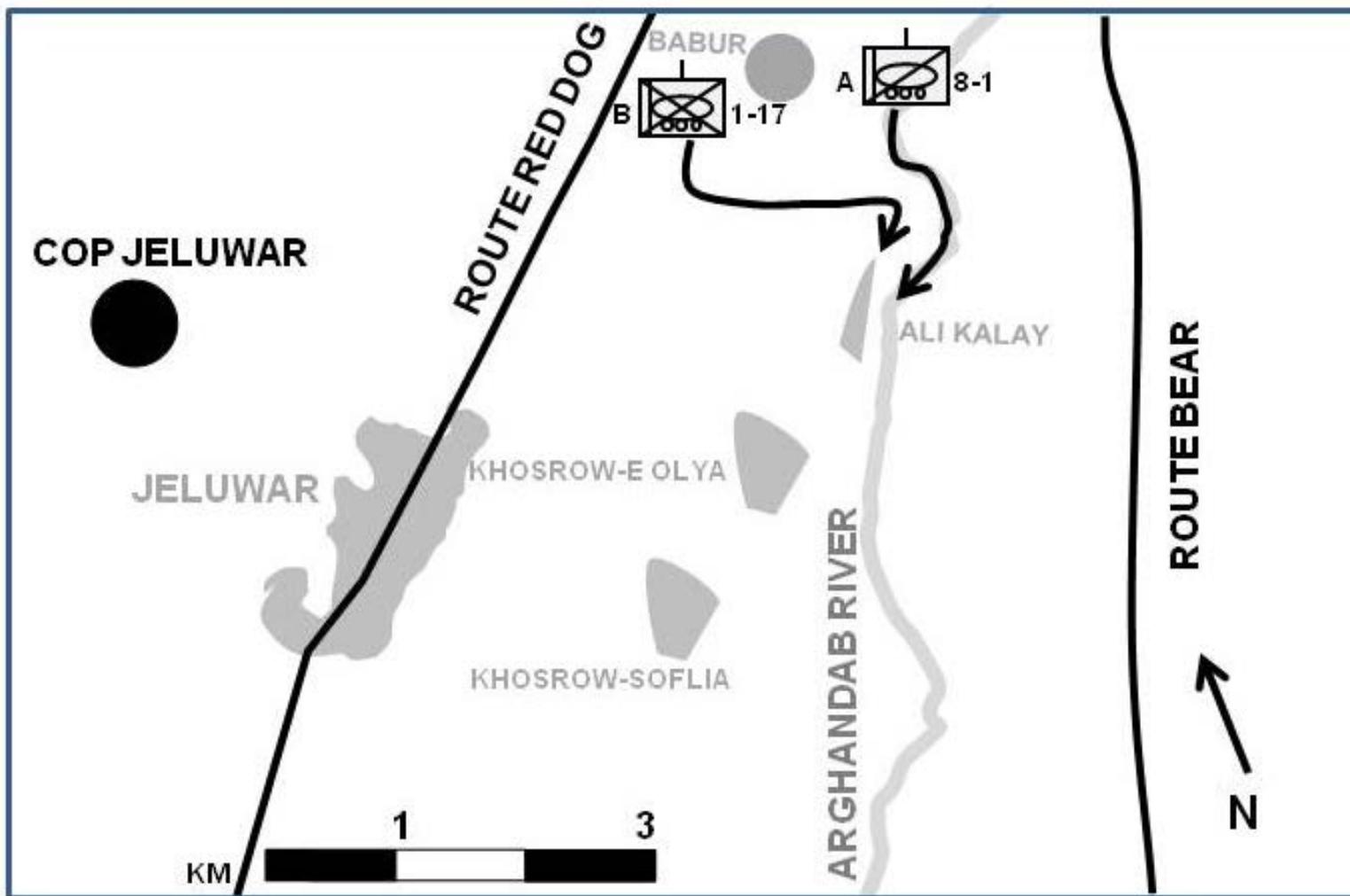


Figure 16. Operation OPPORTUNITY HOLD, the advance south.

Source: author/CSI generated

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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 hanging

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probably did the enemy,” said Quiggle.<sup>60</sup> In fact, one of the Soldiers in the TAC Stryker heard the F-18 and shouted “RPG!” and hit the deck.<sup>61</sup> The F-18 had the desired effect and the enemy disengaged. The fight 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.”<sup>62</sup> 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!”<sup>63</sup> 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.<sup>64</sup>

To Neumann, the incident proved that the system worked. Staff members who maintained their situational awareness and a focused eye

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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.<sup>68</sup> 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.<sup>69</sup> 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.<sup>70</sup> Quiggle’s cavalymen 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.”<sup>71</sup> 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.<sup>72</sup>

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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."<sup>76</sup> 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  $\zeta$  ring device, exploding the Claymore. After the detonation, a Soldier near Knowler whispered, "That stick didn't even  $\zeta$  nish snapping and you hit it."<sup>77</sup> Knowler listened again and this time heard some rustling by a tree where he was supposed to have set up his original OP. He  $\zeta$  red  $\zeta$  ve 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.

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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.<sup>79</sup> 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, leaving numerous blood trails. The engagement had lasted 10 minutes.<sup>80</sup>

Quiggle linked up with Pope and the two tied in their tanks 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.<sup>81</sup> 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

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

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."<sup>85</sup> With that, Quiggle maneuvered his unit to the river, where the cavalymen 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.<sup>86</sup>

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 SoÀa. 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

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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.<sup>92</sup>

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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 SoÀa 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 çreç ghts. 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 ç ghting season ended.<sup>1</sup> More than one insurgent commander was relieved of command. “We think most of the [senior] leadership actually [exçltrated],” explained Major O’Connor, “and left their lower leaders there to ç ght it out.”<sup>2</sup>

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

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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 repower and, critically, it gives you connectivity across the brigade in a way that’s almost unsurpassed in terms of any of our armies.”<sup>5</sup>

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*

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## **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.”<sup>8</sup> 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.”<sup>9</sup> Even when BUFFALO STAM-

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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.<sup>11</sup> 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 Section (MGS) and the Mobile Mortar Section (MMS) in the Stryker's fire

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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.

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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.<sup>15</sup> 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.”<sup>16</sup> 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 repower.

### **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

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

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 SoAa, 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."<sup>22</sup> 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."<sup>23</sup>

## **The Insurgency in Southern Afghanistan**

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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 to 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.”<sup>25</sup> 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 to be located.<sup>26</sup>

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

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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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## Endnotes

1. Major Ryan O'Connor, interview by Kevin M. Hymel, Combat Studies Institute, Fort Leavenworth, KS, 16 April 2012, 63, 71.
2. O'Connor, interview, 16 April 2012, 62.
3. O'Connor, interview, 16 April 2012, 62; "Governance, Reconstruction & Development, Interim Report: The First Six Months (Unclassified)" (5th Stryker Brigade, 2nd Infantry Division, 15 January 2010), 2.
4. Major James Pope, interview by Kevin M. Hymel, Combat Studies Institute, Fort Leavenworth, KS, 20 March 2012, 131, 137.
5. Lieutenant General Nick Patrick Carter, interview by Kevin M. Hymel, Combat Studies Institute, Fort Leavenworth, KS, 3 May 2012, 2 -4.
6. Colonel Jonathan Neumann, interview by Kevin M. Hymel, Combat Studies Institute, Fort Leavenworth, KS, 20 April 2012, 106.
7. First Lieutenant Brian Giroux, interview by Kevin M. Hymel, Combat Studies Institute, Fort Leavenworth, KS, 21 March 2012, 9-10, 18-20, 21; Colonel Jonathan Neumann, interview by Kevin M. Hymel, Combat Studies Institute, Fort Leavenworth, KS, 20 April 2012, 84, 104-107; Don Kramer, "Vice President Grieves with Fort Lewis for Fallen Stryker Soldiers," *Army.mil*, 10 November 2009, [http://www.army.mil/article/30206/Vice\\_President\\_grieves\\_with\\_Fort\\_Lewis\\_for\\_fallen\\_Stryker\\_Soldiers/](http://www.army.mil/article/30206/Vice_President_grieves_with_Fort_Lewis_for_fallen_Stryker_Soldiers/) (accessed 06 November 2012).

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19. First Sergeant Eugene Hicks, interview by Kevin M. Hymel, Combat Studies Institute, Fort Leavenworth, KS, 23 April 2012, 50.
20. Neumann, e-mail, 2 January 2013.
21. Berschinski, interview, 36; Knowler, interview, 46.
22. Chosin Company, 1-17 IN, group interview by Kevin M. Hymel, Combat Studies Institute, KS, 20 March 2012, 172.
23. Jennings, interview, 3.
24. Major Joshua Glonek, interview by Kevin M. Hymel, Combat Studies Institute, Fort Leavenworth, KS, 25 May 2012, 28.
25. Major Joshua Glonek, interview by Kevin M. Hymel, Combat Studies Institute, Fort Leavenworth, KS, 25 May 2012, 28.
26. Glonek, interview, 62.
27. Neumann, interview, 212.
28. Staff Sergeant Michael Brown, interview by Kevin M. Hymel, Combat Studies Institute, Fort Leavenworth, KS, 7 June 2012, 77.
29. Brown, interview, 78.
30. A/1-17, group interview, 86.
31. A/1-17, group interview, 86.
32. A/1-17 group interview 86

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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 |

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SBCT

Stryker Brigade Combat Team

SLLS

Stop, Look, Listen and Smell

TAC

Tactical Command Post

TOC

Tactical Operations Center

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### **About the Author**

Kevin M. Hymel served on the Afghanistan Study Team at the Combat Studies Institute and previously worked for a number of military and military history magazines as a researcher, editor, and writer. He is the author of *Patton's Photographs: War As He Saw It* and coauthor of *Patton: Legendary World War II Commander* with Martin Blumenson. He holds an MA in History from Villanova University.

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