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## What Really Happened in the Tagab Valley? A Response to Second Lieutenant James Parker

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I read with great interest the [September 22 post](#) on PSYOP in the Tagab Valley of Kapisa Province. As both the author of several articles on the province, including a [study of counterinsurgency operations](#) there, and considering that province was where I spent the majority of my deployment earlier this year, I was excited to hear a bit about how the area was doing.

What I found, however, caused me to scratch my head. 2LT Parker made several assertions that clashed with my experience and understanding of the area, and after asking several ex-colleagues and other contacts in the area, there are a few points that should be disputed.

For starters, there is the claim that the residents of the Tagab Valley represented, “the most virulently hostile population to the Taliban” of any other population in the entirety of RC-East. Considering RC-East contains provinces like Panjshir, Bamiyan, and even Parwan, this statement is dubious at best. In February of 2009, when the winter cold restricts Taliban activity and Coalition is relatively easier, residents up and down the Valley expressed to me and my team a range of sentiments, from friendliness to hostility, of both the Taliban and Coalition—sometimes at the same time.

Furthermore, in early 2009, when I visited the province and met with the Tagab district sub-governor and NDS chief were both trying to get the chief of police fired because he was “too focused on fighting the Taliban.” Near the Tagab, in Alasay district, we knew of one man fighting the Taliban, but he was Hezb-i Islami Gulbuddin, so he wasn’t really on our side anyway. Unless there was a fundamental change in the valley’s sentiment and outlook in the few months between 2LT Parker’s redeployment and my arrival there, I’m not clear why he would grant Tagabis such power.

Southern Tagab, for example, is mostly quiet because there’s very little Coalition presence there—while it’s quickest to travel from FOB Morales-Frazier to the Sarobi Lakehouse by driving straight down the Tagab Valley, the French and American units in the area would often double back through Parwan and Kabul provinces, and approach the Lakehouse from the south because of the credible, and constant threats of complex ambushes along the central valley.

Right up until the French operation to sweep up the Alasay Valley in March of 2009, the Tagab Valley remained deeply hostile to Coalition activity: almost daily, we’d hear the muffled remnants of gunfights with the ANA or ANP echoing up the valley. Venturing more than a few

meters off the main MSR through the valley brought hostile glares or a refusal to meet CF personnel; even villages along the road were mostly split between hostility and friendship. Similarly, during a visit to the Tagab District Center in February of 2009, the soldiers running security did not behave as if they were in an area renown for its sporadic anti-Taliban sentiment and activity. In fact, while these same soldiers relaxed in calm areas further north, like Nijrab, they always remained tense and aware of militant movements in the Tagab.

Then there is 2LT Parker's claim that the Tactical PSYOP Team stationed in the Tagab was the most prolific of the regional command, and thus responsible for such sentiment. It is a claim difficult to square with facts. By late June of 2008, the PSYOP "team" in Tagab consisted of one person, since his commander had pulled all the other PSYOP troops out of the valley. The remaining NCO, according to the local HTT, was by all measures a competent and dedicated soldier, but hardly the one-man salvation 2LT Parker makes him out to be.

There are also problems in PSYOP dissemination *quality*. The HTT had long talks with the one-man Tactical PSYOP Team there, and he expressed deep frustration with the rules and red tape involved in disseminating context-significant messages. When a local Afghan in nearby Alasay, for example, asked us to help spread the word about how the government can help the residents of the valley, the TPT could only have his interpreter hand out generic pamphlets—most of which turned into kindle for the house fires—urging residents to call a hotline to report insurgent activity. Even shouting this through a loudspeaker didn't really help things much, as it wasn't related to the situation we were facing (not to mention handling out pieces of paper to an illiterate audience is a questionable activity).

Now, as a former employee of the Human Terrain System, I would never quarrel with the assertion that the population is the key "terrain" in a counterinsurgency. However, I must conclude 2LT Parker got his history confused: there was no PRT presence in the Tagab until the March/April timeframe, when the 101<sup>st</sup> Airborne upgraded the single platoon of LRRPs (Long Range Reconnaissance Patrol) at FOB Pathfinder to an entire infantry company. There, too, the 2LT's account clashes with experience; one of the contractors hired by PRT Kapisa to pave the main road traveling the length of the province was murdered by the Taliban. While this certainly inflamed sentiment anger against the Taliban (or Hizb-i Islami or Harakat-i Islami, since those are also active in the valley), it had the effect of cowing many people into refusing to resist the insurgents further.

Indeed, despite the strong advocacy of the inherent power of the reconstruction projects he mentions, whenever I had a conversation with elders from the area they expressed frustration at how the funds were spent, the contractors hired, and the apparently neglect of far more practical projects. One, in fact, even begged me to ask the PRT to stop massive construction projects in favor of fixing retaining walls, fixing wells and irrigation channels, and repairing their mosque. The message my team and I sent up the chain was: our efforts are misplaced.

I asked several members of the HTT responsible for this region of Afghanistan. They've spent a significant amount of time in the province, outside the wire speaking with Afghans. In fact, they all had universally positive things to say about the PSYOP soldier stationed in Tagab, and the role of PSYOP in campaigning. But the story of PSYOP in Kapisa in late 2008 and early 2009 is

struggling with the tide, not inspiring spontaneous outbursts of pro-Coalition sentiment. The two PSYOP soldiers I knew who worked at FOB Moralies-Frazier, at the mouth of the Nijrab, Afghaniya, and Tagab valleys (they alternated between that FOB and Bagram) were in a constant struggle for materials, transportation, access, and in some cases direction. While their efforts to improvise effect messaging were valiant (and in some cases coordinated with the French CIMIC group and the HTT), they certainly did not have command of the entire district, as is portrayed.

There is one last point to discuss about the history of the Tagab. 2LT Parker says the valley was ignored until September of 2006. This is not true. While Operation Al Hasn received a great deal of media attention, and even the blessing of General Eikenberry, it was a followup to a little-publicized 2005 offensive by Special Operations Forces that killed several dozen militants and forced a larger number to flee to Pakistan. Operation Al Hasn was planned because after the SOF left the valley the militants filtered back in. While it may seem a minor point, understanding that the Coalition has tried for many years to find its panacea for the area gives one a bit more temperance when considering the short term efficacy of any particular policy or tactic.

Then there is the discussion of effects. 2LT Parker states that the POTF-AF 2008 team, which operated from January to August of 2008 (the French actually took command of the province in July), was “remarkable” for how effective they were. I would be curious how he could square that assertion with that summer’s violence—2008 was the worst year on record for ambushes, IED emplacements, and rocket attacks. In June of 2008, the PRT commander complained to a *Janes* reporter that the two high profile attacks earlier that year in Kabul—the bombing of the Serena Hotel in January and the mortar attack on the Mujahidin Day Parade in April—were planned and coordinated from the Tagab Valley. It is difficult to accept both the boasting of POTF-AF 2008’s prolific PSYOP dissemination with the drastic deterioration in security.

Given the open and easily discovered anti-Taliban sentiment of the populations in Panjshir and Bamiyan, it is difficult to accept 2LT Parker’s assertion that in 2008 Kapisa was the most hostile to the Taliban. While it does exist, even by July of 2008 such deep, widespread, and active sentiment simply did not exist outside of the norther Tajik enclaves of the province. Furthermore, 2LT Parker’s neglects to mention the contributions of the ANA and NDS in collecting the intelligence that led to the HVT strikes against Taliban commanders—when combined with the disappointing reality that killing near 20 significant insurgent commanders in the Valley did not noticeably reduce the violence or threat levels, it’s unclear where, exactly, such an optimistic assessment is coming from.

Lastly, I am certain that the Afghan victims of insurgent targeting resent being used as evidence of Coalition messaging effectiveness. Considering that in 2009 the security situation had deteriorated steadily for the previous two years, one is left with the conclusion that all this PSYOP messaging did was inflame Taliban violence against civilians. That is obviously an unfair conclusion, but surely in an essay about how effective messaging can motivate a population to resist an insurgency... the author could scrounge up a few examples that demonstrate causation? The prevalence of messaging and an uptick in violence do not exactly point toward a charitable impression of PSYOP in the Tagab Valley—which I think is not what 2LT Parker intended.

Now, PSYOP and effective messaging is undoubtedly an important part of the counterinsurgency. But so are other things—in 2009, for example, the French security gains have played a far bigger, and more easily measurable, role in improving Kapisa's lot than messaging. Since 2005, the Tagab has been the site of at least four major campaigns to clear the area of insurgents, and while 2009 did not have an operation on the scale of Al Hasn or Nauroz Jhala, it still featured significant activity to clear and hold larger areas of the province (the addition of a French brigade will surely improve things further). Messaging has been an integral part of those operations, but it has not been the only operation going on.

There remains very little data on the efficacy of PSYOP dissemination across the country—over the past year I've spoke with several units, in multiple provinces in different regions of Afghanistan, and they have no idea if they are effective or not. While 2LT Parker's enthusiasm for the mission is admirable, the story he tells here clashes too much with the experiences of a number of people for it to be believable.

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