

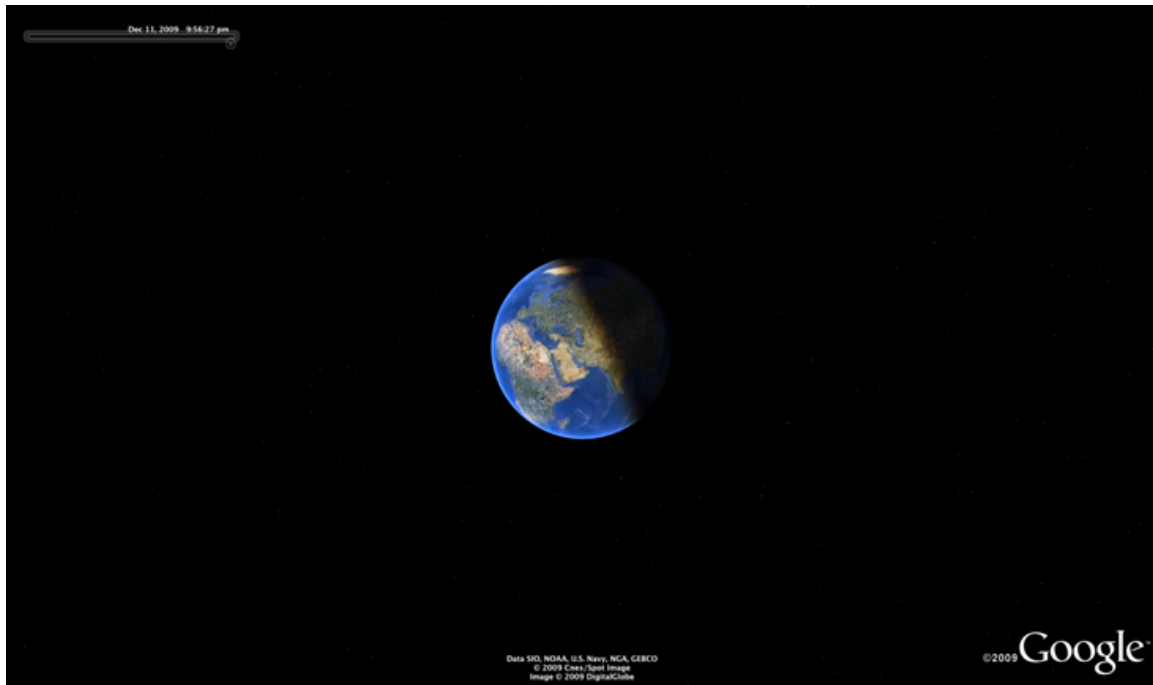


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Arghandab and the Battle for Kandahar

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People are confused about the war. The situation is difficult to resolve even for those who are here. For most of us, the conflict remains out of focus, lacking reference of almost any sort. Vertigo leaves us seeking orientation from places like Vietnam—where most of us never have been. So sad are our motley pundits-cum-navigators that those who have never have been to Afghanistan or Vietnam shamelessly use one to reference the other. We saw this in Iraq.

The most we can do is pay attention, study hard, and try to bring something into focus that is always rolling, yawing, and seemingly changing course randomly, in more dimensions than even astronauts must consider. All while gauging dozens of factors, such as Afghan Opinion, Coalition Will, Enemy Will and Capacity, Resources, Regional Actors (and, of course, the Thoroughly Unexpected). Nobody will ever understand all these dynamic factors and track them at once and through time. That's the bad news.

The good news is that a tiger doesn't need to completely understand the jungle to survive, navigate, and then dominate. It is not necessary to know every anthropological and historical nuance of the people here. If that were the case, our Coalition of over forty nations would not exist. More important is to realize that they are humans like us. They get hungry, happy, sad, and angry; they make friends and enemies (to the Nth degree); they are neither supermen nor vermin. They're just people.

But it always helps to know as much as you can. This will take much time, many dispatches, and hard, dangerous work. Let's get started.



The Taliban's main effort at the moment is Kandahar City. See it down there? Let's move closer.



The new troops likely will be deployed to the south and east of Afghanistan.

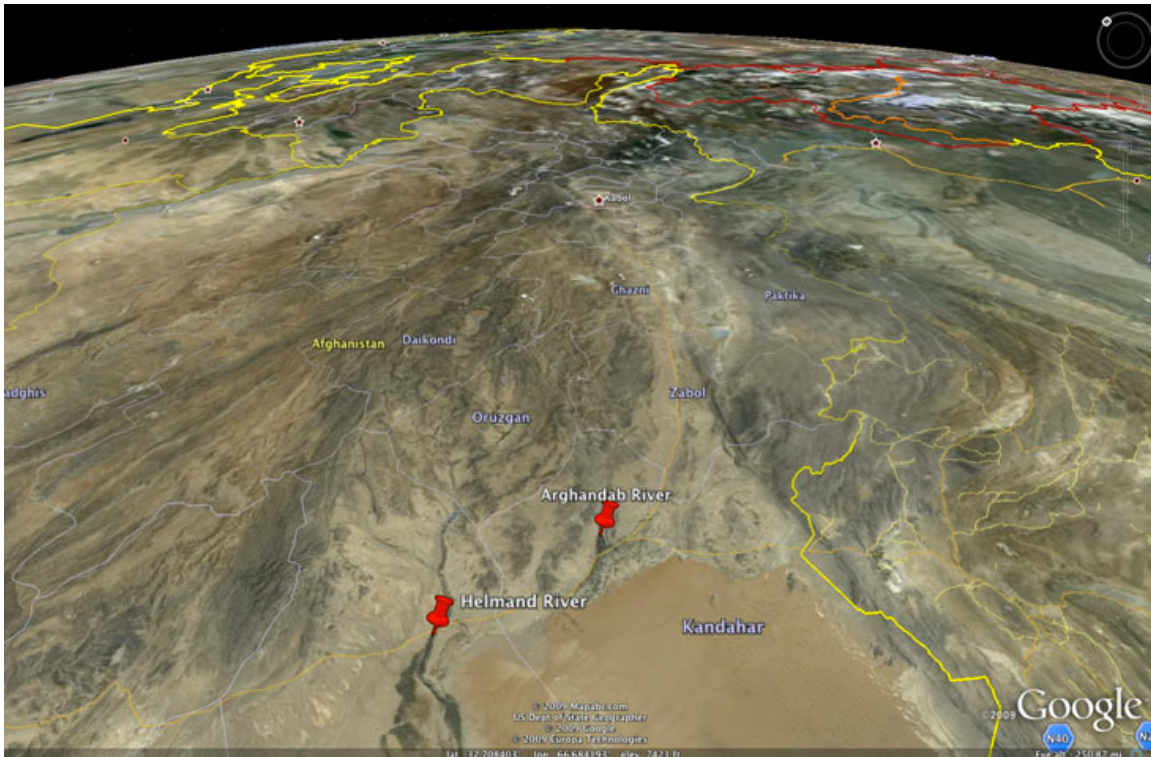
First, let's talk about understanding "the borders." They are fictitious. The "borders" that describe the "country" of Afghanistan have trivial effect on the enemy, but the borders (without quotes) greatly affect Pakistan and the Coalition. The AfPak frontier will be sealed the day frogs stop croaking. We complain that Pakistan should help, but they can't do much. We haven't secured the Tex-Mex border. Many Afghans are migratory in the way that we see Mexican laborers in the United States. Only instead of just picking corn, some will pick corn and supplement their income by planting a bomb. For some, it's just business, like being a hired gun in Iraq or Afghanistan. Lots of normal people will do those jobs. We must consider this when thinking about the rent-a-Taliban.



Southern and Central Afghanistan along the “border.”

President Obama and NATO will plan to send tens of thousands more troops. The big fight shaping up will likely unfold in the south, in places like Helmand, Kandahar, and to a much lesser extent, Zabul, and also in other eastern provinces. We could use far more troops, and so other places will be left to fester, but the surge and change of course might be enough to turn the war around. We will find out.

Russians say we repeat their mistakes but they are wrong. The Soviets employed true scorched-earth tactics—the same tactics that many armchair commanders at home would like to employ. Every time the Soviets whacked the Afghan hive, more hornets raged out. Soviets bullied their way around places like Hungary and Czechoslovakia, and were fantastically brutal in Afghanistan, using all the fire they could breathe. Their “Rules of Engagement,” if any, were probably more concerned with conserving ammunition. They tortured.



Our fighting is relatively limited compared to the Soviets. The Bear had to fight anywhere it stepped because the soldiers bullied and abused people.

Soviet abuses enflamed the population and combat ranged from north to south—with much occurring in Kandahar Province, the capital of which is Kandahar City. The Soviets fought in places like Bamian, where today Americans can literally go on vacation. The Lithuanian Ambassador to Afghanistan told me he took some holidays in Bamian and loved it. Last year, I drove about a thousand miles from Jalalabad to Kabul to Mazar-i-Sharif and back, and other places, with no problems and no soldiers. Most of the country is not at war. Much of this is a result of our strict “Rules of Engagement” (ROE) which seems to be driving people crazy at home (and many soldiers, too). Many soldiers hate these new ROE, and there is little doubt that we will lose troops due to restrictive ROE. My own thoughts are of little relevance.



Green valleys of the Helmand and Arghandab Rivers.

Left Green Zone

The Green Zone on the left is a result of the Helmand River Valley, and also widespread American construction projects last century. These projects left goodwill toward Americans and fantastic agricultural opportunities for the drug lords, whose products are said to kill more people every year than the war itself. The drugs are a crucial part of this war and must be correctively addressed.

The British are running the fight in Helmand Province—they are fighting well and courageously but are under-resourced. There are US Marines, Danish, and other folks out there. In Helmand, the fight is serious, and friendly troops are spread far too thinly. Some experts believe that focusing on Helmand before securing Kandahar was a strategic error. Most districts in Kandahar are said to be under Taliban control or heavy influence. Some areas of the south are under complete, uncontested Taliban control. The brown area comprising the lower third of the image above is a massive desert.

Right Green Zone

The Green Zone to the right is caused by the Arghandab River, just next to Kandahar. The Taliban want Kandahar and are in a good position to get it. The year 2010 likely will mark a true Battle for Kandahar, though it probably will not be punctuated by the sort of pitched battles we saw in places like Mosul and Baghdad. This remains unknown.



The vast Arghandab River Valley, or “ARV,” is crucial to securing Kandahar City. The enemy has complete freedom of movement in the city. Easy access from ARV to KC can be seen in the image above.

Armies from at least three countries have ventured into the Arghandab River Valley: British, followed by Soviets, and more recently Canadians; all were unsuccessful.

In the book *Three Campaigns in Afghanistan* (on the subject of Britain’s three wars), difficult engagements are described: “Further west, however, there is a great gap in the hills, where the plain narrows and runs in the Arghandab Valley. To force a passage in this direction, through thickly sown villages and gardens and vineyards, was ‘no child’s play.’ Without masses of well-trained infantry, the attempt could not have been made at all.”

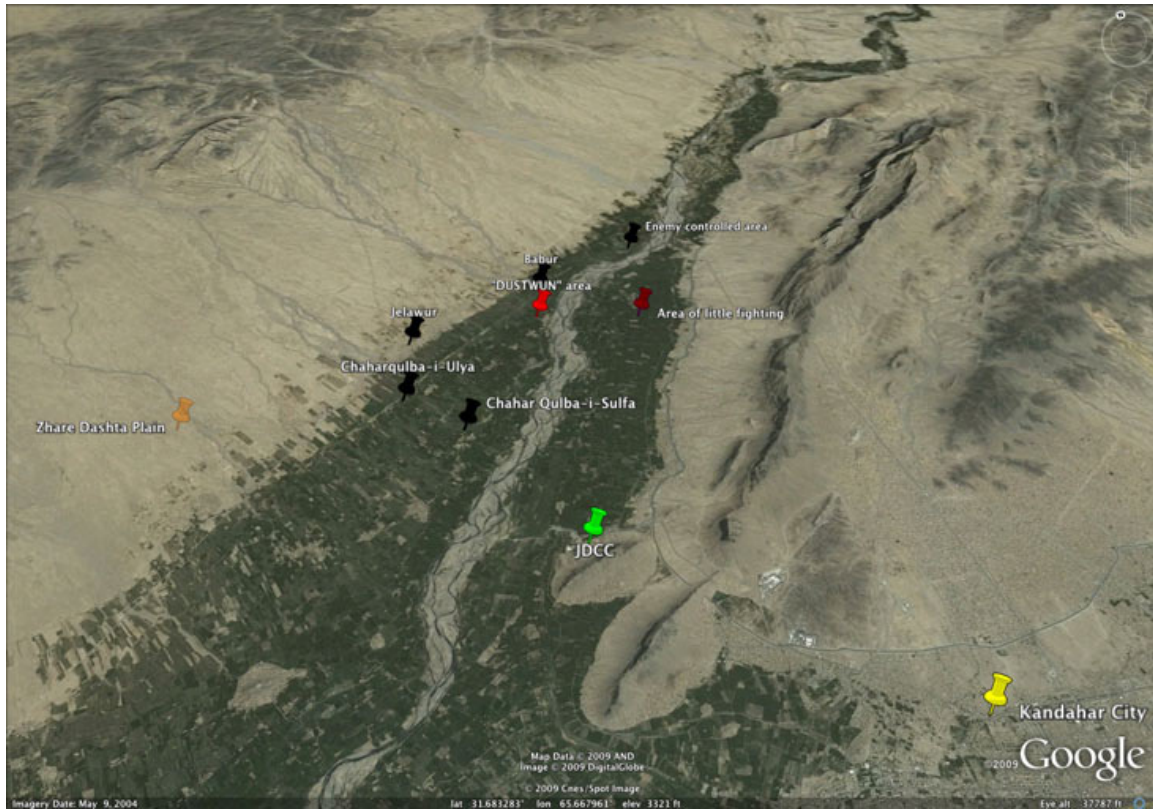
The Soviets came. *The Bear Went Over the Mountain* contains a description by Soviet Army LTC S.V. Zelenskiy: “In October 1982, our reconnaissance learned that 10 guerrilla forces with a total strength of approximately 350 men were operating north of Kandahar City in the ‘green zone’ bordering the Arghandab River. This fertile ‘green zone’ stretches for 15-20 kilometers along the northern bank of the river and is up to seven kilometers wide. It is an agricultural region of gardens and vineyards bisected by a network of irrigation ditches. It is practically impassible for vehicles.”

LTC Zelenskiy continues:

“The brigade received an order to destroy these mujahideen. The commander’s concept was to seal off the north with the *broneguppy* of three battalions. Helicopter gunship patrols would fly patrol patterns to seal off the south and east.”

The Soviets were defeated. That was 1982. But the Soviets kept trying. In 1987, the Soviets came with all they could muster.

The Battle for Chaharqulba Village



Today's JDCC in green. One of Mullah Omar's wives hails from Jelawar, where US forces operate today. The valley is dotted by villages not depicted here.

The history is acutely relevant because the 5/2 Stryker Brigade Combat Team from Fort Lewis, Washington, is at this very moment fighting in the ARV, in the same villages described.

The book *The Other Side of the Mountain: Mujahideen Tactics in the Soviet Afghan War* recounts some experiences of Mujahideen Commander Akhtarjhan, who joined the Jihad at age 12. At war's end he was a twenty-five-year-old commander.

Akhtarjhan describes the 1987 battle:

“The Soviets were there in strength, but they stayed on the plain with their tanks and artillery and seldom committed their own infantry.” The Soviets pushed Afghan troops ahead.

The guerrillas had fortifications and thousands of mines. The Soviets employed the tactics that many people at home beg for today; massive artillery, bombings, helicopter attacks.

According to *The Bear Trap: The Defeat of a Superpower*, Soviet commanders did not search and destroy; they destroyed then searched in villages throughout Afghanistan.

The battle raged for days, then weeks. The guerillas began to crack. According to Commander Akhtarjhan, they had plenty of ammunition but were starving and would take food and supplies from soldiers they fought.

”...my base (was) in Babur village in the orchards on the west bank...”

(Today, leaders in 5/2 Stryker Brigade say that Taliban wounded are evacuated to Babur.)

During the big battle, Soviets crept with their vehicles from the Zhare Dashta plain, just west out of the Green Zone, toward the guerrilla base in the village of Chaharqulba. Sandbags on the Soviet vehicles made them difficult to kill with RPGs, but “It took them a week of fighting to cover six kilometers to our base.”

According to Akhtarjhan, the District Government post was on the east side of the river (as today), and the guerrillas used the east side as R&R because the Soviets would not bomb that area. Interestingly, today, there are relatively few actions in the northeast Arghandab Valley, but the west side of the river is a madhouse during fighting season. Unlike the Iraqis who would fight in their own neighborhoods, Afghans take it somewhere else.

Commander Akhtarjhan recounted: “During the siege, however, we could not send our wounded to Pakistan. We could not remove the shrapnel and so many of our seriously wounded died of their wounds. We had a few Arabs in our base at this time. They were there for Jihad credit and to see the fighting. ‘If you are Muslims, help us collect the wounded,’ we would tell them. They would refuse.”

On June 05, 1987, the *Manila Standard* reported that Afghan forces “lost as many as 1,500 men through desertion and casualties,” and that “a 6,000 strong Soviet-Afghan force launched a massive operation on May 26 against their positions around Kandahar and nearby Arghandab.

The sources said the anti-government units fought back and captured 300 Afghan troops and seven Soviet soldiers. They added that guerrillas killed four of the Soviet soldiers while the other three joined guerrilla ranks.”

Akhtarjhan recounted, “We let the enemy get closer than ten meters to us before opening fire. We let them get this close for two reasons. First we wanted to be sure to get them with the first shot. Second, we wanted to prevent their escape. We laid thousands of PMN mines [anti-personnel] in the area – particularly on the infantry approaches from Jelawor.”

The guerrillas were having a hard time killing Soviet vehicles. The mujahideen became dispirited and were ready to retreat. But then Akhtarjhan’s Senior Commander, Mullah Naqib,

said, "This is their last battle and will decide the battle between them and us. They've tried to conquer the base for years and this is their last throw."

Mullah Naqib strode out to fight alone, and his courage rallied the commanders behind him. After 34 days the Soviets were defeated and retreated.

Of global significance, in what is perhaps ultimate Cosmic Justice, Soviet barbarity was a great factor leading to the downfall of the empire.

Mullah Naqib would become a leader of much influence and would later become helpful to us against the Taliban, who tried unsuccessfully to kill Mullah Naqib. Unfortunately, he died of a heart attack in October 2007. Demonstrating the fragility of the situation, Naqib's death was a major setback for Kandahar city security and left an opening for the Taliban. President Karzai appointed Mullah Naqib's son to take over, but he is deemed both inexperienced and unable to handle the task.

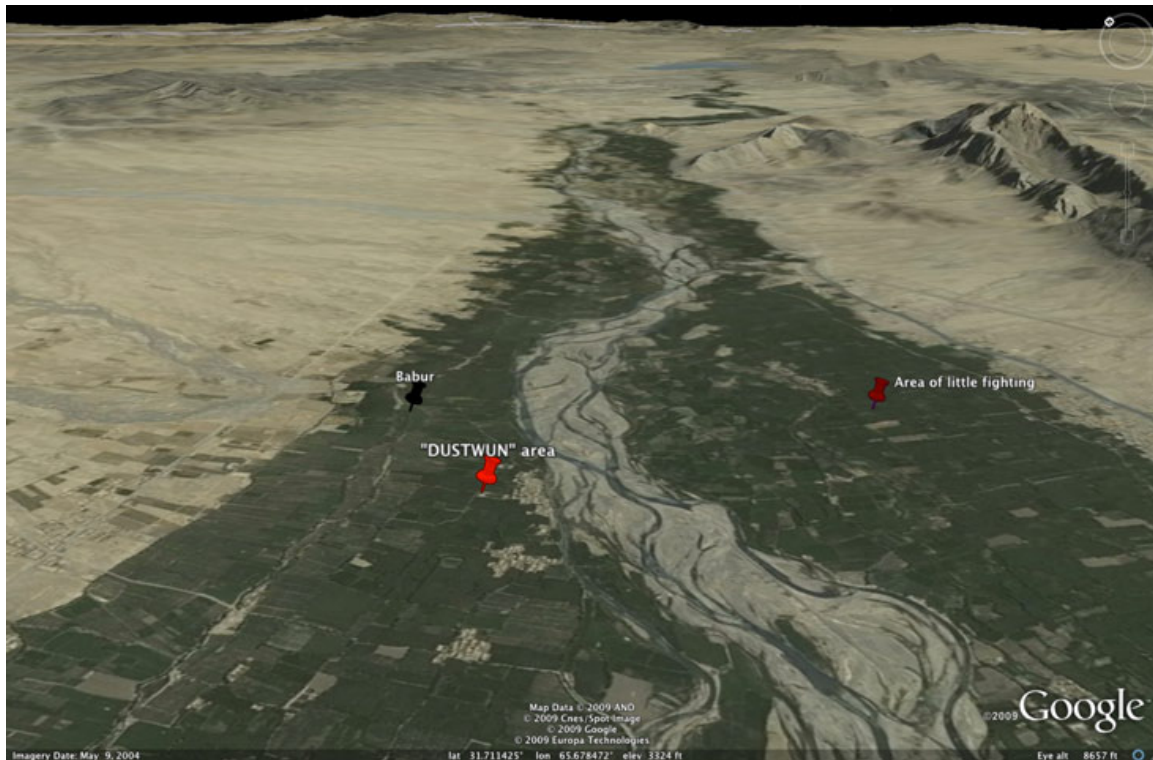
Since the 2001 invasion, U.S. soldiers have come and gone from the Arghandab, but we've never had enough soldiers to sit still. More recently, the Canadians made jabs at Arghandab but did not get far. Some people believe the Canadians have been militarily defeated in their battlespace. No US officer has told me that the Canadians have been defeated, and none have denied it. There is no doubt that Canadian troops earned much respect, and that more than 130 paid the ultimate price.

On current course, Canada will have fully retreated by 2011. This is crucial: the enemy realizes that our greatest weakness is Coalition cohesion and they have defeated what was an important partner.

Now it's mostly down to the U.S. and Afghan forces to saddle Arghandab, or lose Kandahar.

Dustwun

Duty Status: Whereabouts Unknown



During the Soviet fighting, Babur had been a base. Today, Babur is a Taliban medical evacuation destination.

Afghan elections were scheduled for 20 August 2009. With the Canadians effectively neutralized by enemy resistance, the 5/2 Stryker Brigade combat team was tasked to operate in Arghandab to help facilitate voting. The Brigade Commander, Colonel Harry Tunnell, had little intel on the region. (Though I have found 5/2 soldiers reading and discussing everything they can find on the Soviet experience.) The enemy started by making small bombs but those were not effective against Strykers, and so they kept upping the charges to a thousand pounds or more. Enough to destroy any vehicle on the planet.

Early in the tour, two soldiers were killed about twenty minutes apart by IEDs. Their buddies “knew” that the soldiers had been killed, but the bodies could not be found. The U.S. military will practically stop the war to look for a missing soldier. Every available asset was sent to Arghandab and they gained huge intelligence and flooded the place for the first time. Remains were found and the men joined America’s honor roll. The Taliban suffered humiliation.

The enemy is not defeated, but our people were now operating among them. U.S. casualties continued during the next three months but there are indications that the enemy is today in disarray. The enemy became afraid to sleep indoors where they might be killed by an airstrike—

or by U.S. soldiers, who have a tendency to burst in during periods of maximum REM sleep. The Taliban were terrorized and began sleeping in the orchards at night, rigging homes with explosives, which they arm at night. (I've heard similar reports from Pakistan. Pakistanis have said that drone strikes are demoralizing and terrorizing the Taliban, and though drone strikes are controversial, some Pakistanis want to see the strikes increased.)

Tactically, it is important to recognize that Arghandab is agriculturally rich in products such as grapes and pomegranates. The valley is not like the big opium farm we see to the west in the Helmand green zone. Famous for its pomegranates, Arghandab is considered a "breadbasket" for Afghanistan.

Pomegranate trees represent major long-term investments for farmers. The trees take 5-7 years to mature and are productive for about 50 years. The harvest occurs between about the first week of October to mid-November. This is important because the trees are thick and provide good tactical cover for the Taliban, making them difficult to spot from the air, explaining why they sleep in the orchards at night. This angers farmers; the Taliban plant bombs in the orchards, using their livelihoods for cover and concealment, and fighting during harvest season. Bombs kill trees.

Mostly the enemy is gone for now. Each year, many Taliban migrate to Pakistan. The "snowbirds" return and fight during spring. Our signals intelligence people intercepted communications from a senior Taliban leader in Pakistan, to the senior surviving leader in Arghandab, who was then heading to Pakistan. The commander was ordered to return to Arghandab or risk losing to the Americans. U.S. officers at 5/2 said the Taliban commander was very upset by the order.

Colonel Tunnell would say, "It is our assessment that the enemy has been defeated in the near term in the southern Arghandab River Valley, which has given us a few months' breathing space." The Strykers will soon deploy to other missions in southern Afghanistan and will be replaced by the 82nd Airborne Division.

The Taliban in Arghandab got a serious whipping but they are not dead. The winter season is providing our side a brief opportunity to earn local support with various projects in a relatively unmolested environment, while the snowbirds are in Pakistan, no doubt plotting their return.

The Battle for Kandahar is on. Fresh troops in the United States have been given orders to get over here. The chapter called "Arghandab" will be crucial.

Michael Yon is a former Green Beret who has been reporting from Iraq and Afghanistan since December 2004. No other reporter has spent as much time with combat troops in these two wars. Michael's dispatches from the frontlines have earned him the reputation as the premier independent combat journalist of his generation. His work has been featured on Good Morning America, The Wall Street Journal, The New York Times, CNN, ABC, FOX, as well as hundreds of other major media outlets all around the world.

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