



SMALL WARS JOURNAL

smallwarsjournal.com

The Bridge

Michael Yon



Need Bullets? The shortest distance between South Carolina and Kandahar is about 7,500 miles. (As the rocket flies.)

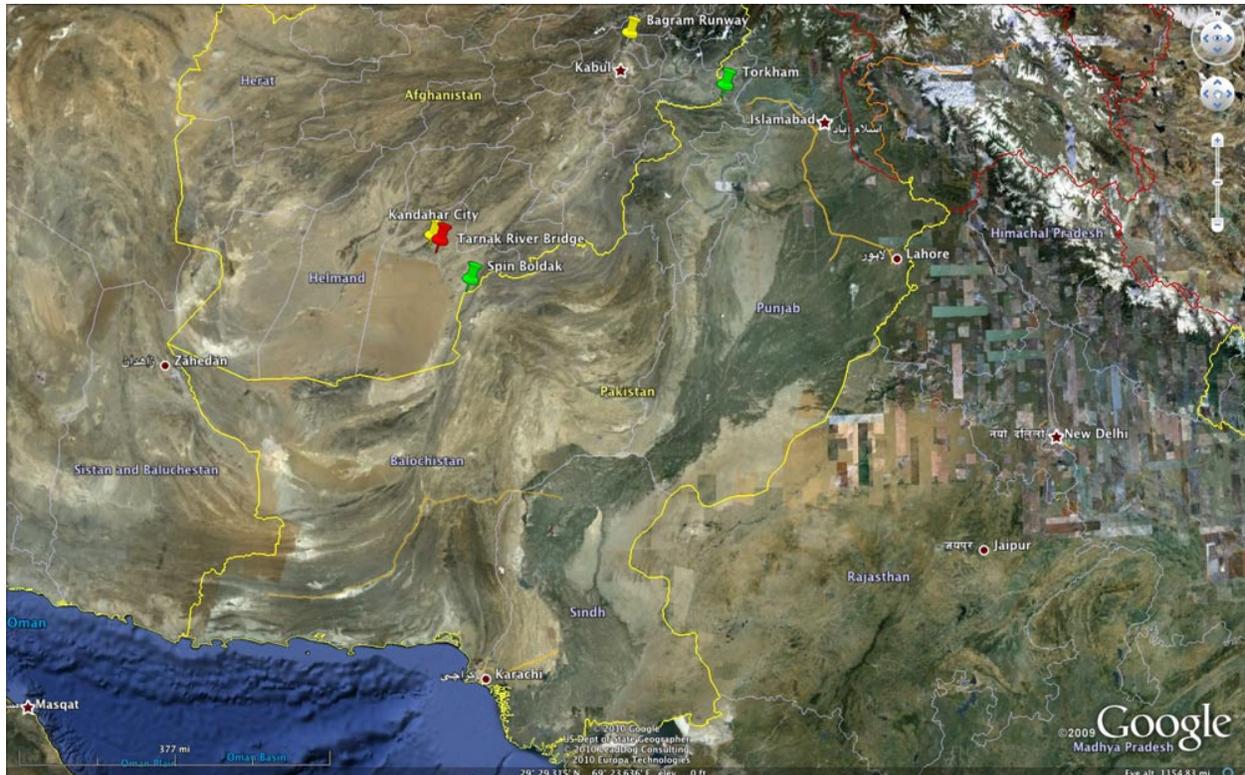
Shah Wali Kot, Afghanistan
11 March 2009

The military axiom that “amateurs talk strategy while professionals talk logistics” has special meaning in Afghanistan. During the Soviet war, though the Bear comprised Afghanistan’s entire northern border, the Afghan resistance was frequently able to block Soviet logistical operations, which were dependent on scant roads, tunnels and corridors. Captured Soviet logistics convoys often supplied the Mujahidin.

Logistics in landlocked Afghanistan are exceptionally tough because the country is a

transportation nightmare of impassable mountains, barren deserts, rugged landscape with only capillary roads and airports.

When we lose a bridge, we can't just detour twenty miles to the next one, as we might on the plains of Europe. In Afghanistan, there might not be another route for hundreds of miles. Conversely, Afghan fighters, who have used guerilla warfare tactics for decades – centuries even – lack our tanks, vehicles and massive supply lines, leaving them less dependent on infrastructure. Most of the guerrillas we face are from the immediate area. Their corn comes from their own stalks; ours comes from other continents.



Cargo lands at Karachi and is trucked into Afghanistan through Spin Boldak and Torkham.

Supplies shipped by sea to the port of Karachi flow through two major arteries into Afghanistan. In the north is Torkham, near the famous Khyber Pass. In the south is Spin Boldak, a border town located between Quetta in Pakistan, and Kandahar in Afghanistan. *Kandahar, with its critical airfield, will be a major locus for the upcoming offensive, making route security crucial to US/NATO plans.*

Stryker Brigade Combat Team 5/2 (SBCT) is responsible for security at the Spin Boldak point of entry and has deployed the 8-1 Cavalry squadron to live in and patrol the area. Just north of Spin Boldak, in the wilds along the border, are known enemy safe havens that were used during the Soviet war.

The Stryker Brigade is also tasked with a Freedom of Movement (FOM) mission that extends from Spin Boldak along Highway 4 past Kandahar Airfield (KAF), which is literally one of the busiest airports in the world. According to AFCENT, during FY09 there were 184,095 tower movements at KAF, which explains why it's so loud there. Highway 4 passes the eastern end of KAF's single runway. About three miles beyond the runway, Highway 4 crosses over the **Tarnak River Bridge**, one of a number of crucial chokepoints, on the road north to Kandahar.



Normally, such a bridge would be irrelevant to larger logistics considerations. Yet this sorry little bridge is important to the United States and NATO, both for the sake of logistics, and, these days, strategy. If the Tarnak river bridge were to be destroyed before or during the upcoming offensive, that inconvenience would become a genuine impediment to movement of troops and supplies.

Some people think the enemy would not attack the crucial bridges because they need them as much as we do. And, in the ongoing battle for the support of the population, the insurgents know that local villagers need the bridges to move any possible produce to market. Yet, as the war progresses, many people understand that we need the bridges more than the enemy does.

From Highway 4, Stryker FOM missions continue along several areas, mostly along Highway 1 out to Helmand Province. The task is to keep the roads open. Throughout most of Kandahar and Helmand Provinces, slightly away from the main roads, the enemy has almost complete freedom of movement. Basically, we “own” the highways while they are mostly free to operate in the countryside. The struggle continues for influence over the inhabitants of the villages, towns and cities.



The KAF runway and Highway 4 are main arteries for the unfolding offensive. Many of the missions and supplies launch from KAF, north along Highway 4, over Tarnak River Bridge.

Who's In Charge?

The overall commander of ISAF forces in Afghanistan is often called "COMISAF," or "M4." The man behind the letters is General Stanley McChrystal. General McChrystal's boss is General David Petraeus at CENTCOM.

Within Afghanistan there are five Regional Commands: RC-West (lead nation Italy); RC-North (Germany); RC-Capital (France); RC-East (United States); RC-South (UK currently).

In theory, the RCs report directly to Lieutenant General David Rodriguez, an experienced and highly respected commander. In practice they are a herd of cats, lacking unity of effort. The reality is that each command reports back to its own leadership – in Rome, Paris, Berlin or wherever.

Down here in RC-South, the current lead nation is the UK. The British Commander is Major General Nick Carter. Americans, Canadians and others fall under RC-South, which is further broken down into Task Force Helmand (TF-H); TF-Kandahar (TF-K); TF-Uruzgan; TF-Zabul; TF-Fury and TF-Stryker.

The Dutch are lead nation in TF-U. Canadians are lead nation in TF-K. The Tarnak River bridge falls in the general area of TF-K.

Please stay with me. This matters.

And so it goes like this:

Major General Nick Carter (UK) commands RC-South.

Brigadier General Daniel Menard (Canada) commands Task Force Kandahar.

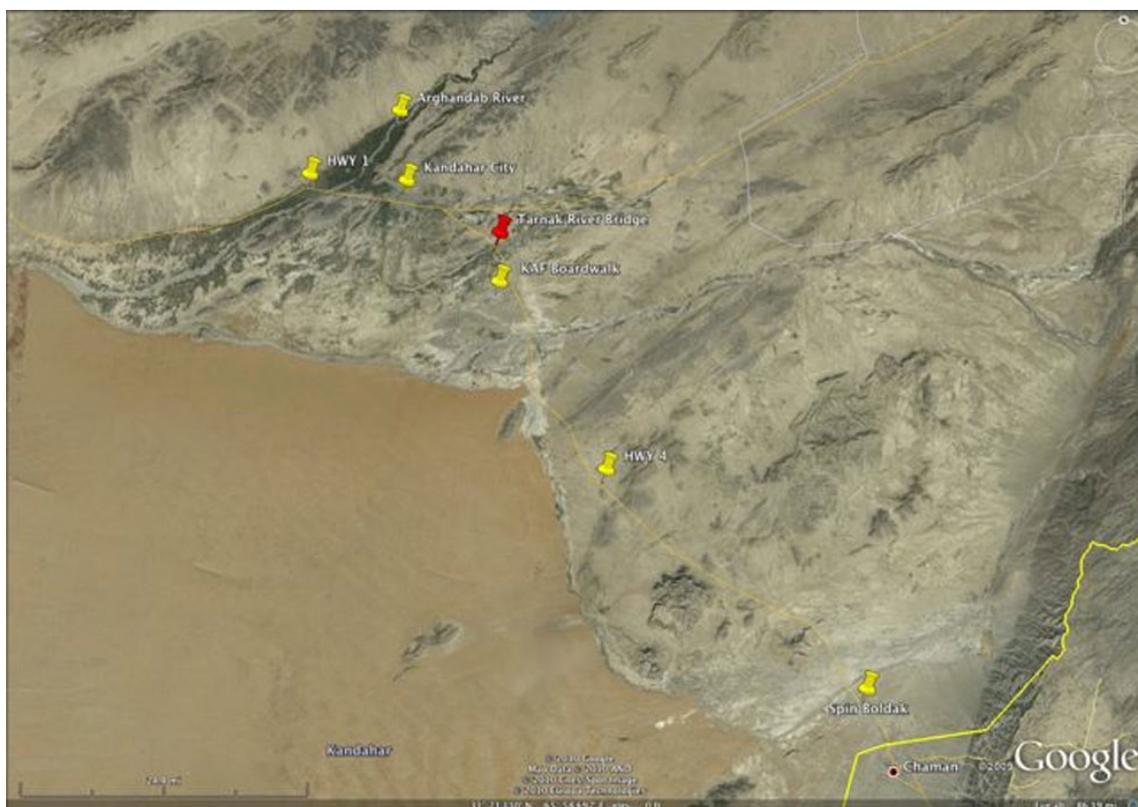
Under BG Menard's command are three U.S. Battalions and just over 2,800 Canadian forces. (U.S. battalions: 1-12 Infantry Reg.; 2-508th Parachute Infantry Regiment; 97th Military Police Battalion). American combat forces comprise a substantial portion of Menard's force structure, leaving his command and Canadian civilian leadership open to fair scrutiny, just as American leadership is open to Canadian inquiry. Moreover, while Canada increasingly shies from combat, American units under Canadian command will spill blood under Canadian military leadership that answers to Ottawa.

Kandahar Province is apportioned into battle spaces. As mentioned, TF-Stryker has responsibilities that include Spin Boldak and FOM on Highway 4 that crosses the Tarnak River Bridge. TF-Stryker, however, is not responsible for the bridge itself.

The British Royal Air Force (RAF) is responsible for something called the GDA. The GDA is the Ground Defense Area, and is responsible for security immediately around KAF. By all accounts, the RAF is doing a fine job. The GDA includes the area around the Tarnak River Bridge.

TF-K is responsible for Kandahar, but the specific area of the bridge belongs to the RAF. However, the Bridge itself is guarded not by RAF but by ANP (Afghan National Police) mentored by the American 97th MPs. The 97th is under Canadian command through TF-K. And so, at the time of the attack, TF-K was responsible for the physical security on the bridge itself, while GDA had responsibility for the land around the bridge.

Which Coalition partner has final responsibility for this strategic bridge? Is it the RAF who "own" the ground, or TF-K who mentor the ANP guarding the bridge? If an officer were to say this vital bridge is solely the responsibility of the ANP, his judgment would be deemed unsound.



Mission -- March 1

On Monday, March 1st, an element from 5/2 SBCT was about to embark on a mission from KAF, up highway 4 and into the Arghandab district, west of Kandahar. I was reading Afghan news just before breakfast when the latest report appeared claiming that Canada is preparing to withdraw from Afghanistan. That would create problems, considering BG Menard is commanding US combat troops.

At 7:35 a.m. I had just left breakfast en route to grab body armor for the mission when *Karuummphh*. . . . Having heard a thousand IEDs and car bombs during the last five years, something sounded wrong. Four miles away as the crow flies, the mushroom cloud could be seen.

A suicide car bomb had exploded on the Tarnak River Bridge, killing civilians and sending a heavily armored MRAP off the bridge. According to reports later that morning, the suicide bomber apparently had waited in ambush and had pulled into the convoy as it crossed the bridge.

American Soldier Ian Gelig was killed while comrades were wounded.

Our mission that day would include driving over the Tarnak River Bridge. The suicide bomb damaged the structure. We could not cross. The mission was scrubbed and rolled back 24 hours.

Next morning, Tuesday, we made another go at the mission, and were strapped into the MRAPs and ready to roll when a FIPR text message scrolled on the MRAP computer that vehicles

attempting an alternate route across a riverbed were getting stuck. (The riverbed was mostly dry, but just a short rain could render it impassable to any traffic.)

With this mission cancelled due to the bridge destruction, I started asking commanders who exactly was in charge of security for that bridge. Everyone said TF-K. Inside the TOC (HQ), I found Colonel Harry Tunnell, Brigade Commander of 5/2, who was busy reading some reports, and asked him who was in charge of security of that bridge. "Was it 5/2?" I asked. No, answered Colonel Tunnell, TF-K is responsible for the bridge. I clarified, TF-K, meaning Task Force Kandahar. The commander is Brigadier General Menard, Yes? "Yes," answered Colonel Tunnell. So General Menard is responsible for that bridge, yes? "Yes," answered the Colonel. Like most American soldiers who have worked with Canadians, Colonel Tunnell generally holds Canadian soldiers in high regard. He probably didn't realize where this was leading. Nor did I.

With time on hand because of the cancelled missions, I spent the afternoon researching who exactly failed to secure the bridge. The attack happened Monday. This was still Tuesday.

Wednesday, I wrote on Facebook:

Task Force Kandahar, responsible for security of the bridge that was blown up on Monday, happens to be under Canadian command. This is causing friction. The Canadian government has clearly signaled that it will quit Afghanistan, yet a Canadian General is commanding US combat forces and resources -- all while allowing a strategically important bridge to be blown up. American officers have been held accountable by Americans for shortcomings in Afghanistan. Our combat soldiers should not be commanded from a country that is quitting the fight. The bridge fiasco on Monday underlines that fact. With our next big offensive set for Kandahar, command should be with British and U.S. forces. Canada needs to step out of the way.

Though numerous sources had confirmed that BG Daniel Menard was responsible for the bridge, the Facebook reports were provoking an array of responses, many of which were centered around hockey and nationalism rather than the strategic bridge. [Note: the entire Facebook dialogue remains public.]

Captain Adam Weece, Brigade Public Affairs Officer at 5/2, emailed to me:

Classification: UNCLASSIFIED

Caveats: FOUO

Just got another update- RAF is responsible for things leading to KAF, not Kandahar City. Bottom line, it's a messy gray area that has changed hands a few times.

v/r

CPT Adam Weece

BDE Public Affairs Officer

5/2 ID (SBCT), Afghanistan

Michael Yon email to Adam Weece:

What is bottom line? Who has responsibility for security of that bridge? Messy gray area is worse than black and white. Messy gray area means at least two commands are fully responsible.

Adam Weece to Michael Yon:

When we (Stryker) assumed the FOM mission, TFK assumed security for the bridge.

Michael to Adam:

Okay, Adam, but this does not specifically say that TF-K had responsibility for security of the bridge at the moment that it was blown up. That's the only answer that is needed. Who had responsibility at the moment the bomb detonated?

Adam:

Michael- I'm writing this out so it's clear. The bridge falls within the GDA or Ground Defense Area, responsibility of which is mutually shared by the Royal Air Force and TFK, depending on the intent of the missions occurring there. If activity there involves the security of Kandahar City then it is the responsibility of the RAF. If activity there involves just the area - like GR and D projects or maintaining the roadway - then it falls under TFK's responsibility. TFK is responsible for repairing the bridge.

END

So we've gone from TF-K is solely responsible to TF-K is partly responsible to we don't really know who is responsible, meaning, at a bare minimum, the General Officers in RC-South and TF-K are responsible.

On Wednesday evening Colonel Tunnell called me into his office, pulled out a marker and began to explain matters on the white board. Colonel Tunnell was open and answered every hard question.



Approximate "Ops Box" around actual image of Tarnak River Bridge.

Colonel Tunnell said that TF-K Area of Operations is Kandahar, but the specific area around the bridge had been assigned to GDA (RAF), and that when units such as those from 5/2 conducting route clearance, or 82nd Airborne, drive over the bridge, they enter what's called an "Ops Box."

In this case, the Ops Box is a transit zone over the bridge. Transiting units radio up to RC-South "CJOC" saying they are entering the Ops Box, and call when they leave.

While GDA is responsible for the ground, TF-K is responsible for the ground around the ground and the ANP on the bridge, while TF-Stryker is responsible for the road but not the bridge or the ground around the bridge.

[Important point: Our people/NATO cannot stop bombs from exploding, nor can they stop people who are guarding the bridge from being killed. Someone must be on the outside perimeter checking vehicles. Some of those people inevitably get killed. Though bombs cannot be stopped, they can be kept off the bridge. This bridge should never have been blown up.]

In response to my Facebook entries, TF-K was swinging back in the press, speaking through willing Canadian voices:

Military rebuffs blogger's call for top Canadian general to be fired

This was going to be a good one: whenever the mainstream media disapproves, they call me a "blogger." (Incorrectly; I don't have a blog and only ran one for some months back in 2005.) When they approve of my work or opinion pieces, they refer to me as an "author," or "war correspondent."

Media outlets chose to cite a source that ignored the fact that a strategic bridge was attacked, and

instead focused on diversions, such as the timing of the Olympics, versus the damage to a strategic bridge under the very nose of a NATO general. This diversion might serve to illustrate the ratings-driven focus from “news” outlets seeking manufactured, inconsequential controversy.

TF-K, for its part, tried to divert attention from the central issue, by introducing stresses created when US soldiers are under Canadian command. There is only one important thread: A strategic bridge was badly damaged because best practice for keeping it secure was not followed. A General was responsible. This controversy never would have occurred if Brigadier General Daniel Menard had secured the bridge several miles outside the gate from his office. He probably heard the explosion.

The failure of Canwest reporters—Canada’s largest media conglomerate—to grasp or acknowledge the point of the story, sadly reinforces the fact that the mainstream media has failed abjectly in accurately reporting the Iraq and Afghan wars. No media outlet acknowledged the importance of the bridge, if they even noticed.

This had become a media chess match. I used Facebook to sling a stone, while the TF-K Goliath used Canwest for cover.

General Menard denied responsibility. If true, this meant the commander of RC-South, Major General Nick Carter, was responsible.

Yet by Thursday afternoon, more than three days since the attack, nobody would answer who was *currently* responsible for the bridge. This was getting surreal.

With TF-K jumping for cover, the only thing left was to take it up to a level.

My Facebook:

Menard vs. Carter

Bridge failure heating up:

TF-K has, for all intents and purposes, blamed RC-South for allowing the bridge to be attacked on Monday, resulting in the death of a US soldier and serious damage to a vital bridge. The controversy has reached the respective Generals at TF-K and RC-South. For those who understand the dynamics here, Brigadier General Daniel Menard (TF-K boss) has shifted the blame to Major General Nick Carter (RC-South boss).

This has become a dinosaur fight -- Menard vs. Carter. Little people can get crushed.

END

--



The Bridge

On Thursday, 4 March, three days after the bombing, traffic was flowing, including the fuel trucks from Pakistan. Normal trade was resuming and cancelled missions restarted. Crucial time was gone.

My Afghan cell phone rang. A British voice at the other end asked if I had time to talk with Brigadier General Hodges at 1710, about two hours later. I said sure.

Then came word that a 5/2 soldier had just been killed and others wounded, so I sat for a while. The soldier's body was on the way back to KAF and the family apparently had not yet been notified.

At 1710 the meeting with BG Ben Hodges began in his office. A U.S. Naval officer, a British officer from Scotland, BG Hodges and me; I was there to answer only two questions: Which Coalition partner was responsible for the bridge on Monday? And, who is responsible for it now? General Hodges explained a bit about battle spaces. **Then he said, squarely, that he, himself was the responsible officer.** I didn't believe him, but did not say so. He insisted that it was his fault. He took that bullet for – who? More to the point, he claimed responsibility for the security of the bridge going forward, knowing he would be under scrutiny. He won my instant respect. I believed he was trying to solve the problem and get on with war fighting. When he took responsibility, I said something like, "That was very courageous, Sir."

As far as I was concerned, General Hodges ended the matter by taking the bullet, though now I had to summarize for people at home.

--

Facebook:

Summary of meeting with Brigadier General Ben Hodges: The result was unexpected. General Hodges courageously accepted full responsibility. My respect for him doubled in about 30 seconds. Henceforth, Strykers will "own" the bridge. Bottom line: problem solved. BREAK. Something very important came up tonight [was the death of a Stryker soldier], so will give accounting Friday. The accounting will include an apology from me to General Menard.

--

In apology to BG Menard, I should not have demanded that he be fired so early in the process, despite that my assertion that he was responsible has proven true. I should never have mentioned hockey, as that created room for a diversion from the central importance. Brigadier General Menard clearly was not the only responsible party for this strategic bridge that his soldiers depend upon. To single out BG Menard was a mistake, despite that he was ultimately responsible for the ANP.

Some hours after the meeting with BG Hodges, after midnight, there was another ramp ceremony at KAF. BG Hodges was there along with many others from Canada, Australia, UK, the US and other countries. A Marine was going home for the last time, alongside the soldier from 5/2 who had been killed earlier in the day. Helicopters and jets were nearly constant, and so loud that I could not hear the chaplain. Just in the background, across the busy runway, in the darkness, was Tarnak River Bridge. Ian Gelig had died there on Monday and been flown home from this same ramp.

Thursday night, two flag-draped coffins were delivered by MRAPs next to the runway. Comrades lifted their coffins onto the C-17. Stryker soldier Anthony Paci, and Marine Nigel Olsen were going home. Hundreds of troops from different nations saluted one last time. The ramp closed and the jet flew into the night.

[Final note: About twenty troops have been killed in Afghanistan during the days since the Tarnak Bridge Bombing. A close source conveyed that Task Force Kandahar, under BG Daniel Menard, will henceforth be tasked with the security for Tarnak River Bridge, and that Task Force Stryker and the RAF are not responsible for the bridge.]

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.

This is a single article excerpt of material published in Small Wars Journal.
Published by and COPYRIGHT © 2010, Small Wars Foundation.

Permission is granted to print single copies for personal, non-commercial use. Select non-commercial use is licensed via a Creative Commons BY-NC-SA 3.0 license and per our Terms of Use. We are in this together.



No FACTUAL STATEMENT should be relied upon without further investigation on your part sufficient to satisfy you in your independent judgment that it is true.

Contact: comment@smallwarsjournal.com

Visit www.smallwarsjournal.com

Cover Price: Your call. [Support SWJ here.](#)