

## British Operations in Helmand Afghanistan

**Daniel Marston**

I'm going to try to provide an overview of British operations, called HERRICK, in Helmand (HLD) province, Afghanistan, over the last couple of years. The situation in southern Afghanistan (RC South) is widely considered to be worsening, with the Taliban controlling entire districts and launching major attacks. The British, along with the rest of our allies, have faced heavy criticism for their prosecution of the war in the south. I will look at how the British have adapted to changing conditions, and their understanding and application of COIN principles. My assessment is not official in any way, and any errors of fact or interpretation are purely mine. This assessment is drawn from the many conversations which I have been privileged to have with commanders from brigadier down to platoon level on all British operations, as well as from field reports and visits with units.

Quick notes on HLD: the HLD River is the key agricultural asset to the province often referred to as the GREEN ZONE. The population is around 783K; most of the population (around 534K) lives along the HLD River from Garmsir in the south to the Kajaki Dam, with the main urban centers from south to north being Lashkar Gar, Gereshk, Sangin, and to the west of Sangin, Musa Qaleh and Nowzad. The vast majority of Afghanistan's heroin trade originates in HLD and it is also one of the most heavily mined provinces in Afghanistan.



Helmand Province and River

The British first sent a brigade into HLD province in April 2006. At the start of British operations, the mission was hampered by the fact that Her Majesty's Government (HMG) and the Ministry of Defence (MoD) had generally failed to stipulate that what was needed was a COIN campaign. The mission was originally presented as a peace support and counter-narcotics operation. This framing of the mission was primarily a matter of political expediency, but also showed a lack of understanding and historical knowledge of COIN on the part of both military and civilian officials. As one practitioner recalled: 'the Task Force was initially directed to conduct peace support operations to set security conditions required to foster economic development and improved governance. However, the TF quickly found itself conducting near continuous combat operations in the warfighting phase of a complex COIN campaign.'

Once on the ground, and having identified the need for a COIN strategy, the first operational tour intended to carry out a strategy of clear, hold and build, limited to a small area around and pushing north from Lashkar Gar, the provincial capital. However, political considerations forced the British to deviate from this strategy and establish platoon houses in Afghan District Centers throughout the province. This proved to be a potentially disastrous decision; it not only stretched British resources to the breaking point, but also allowed large forces, comprising hundreds of insurgents, to surround and potentially isolate these British outposts.

The main reason why this strategy almost went so badly wrong was, as it has been for many Coalition members, a lack of manpower. When operations began, the 16 AA Bde was in command, but had only one infantry battalion (battlegroup in British military parlance), 3 PARA, with supporting arms. In response to the attacks on platoon houses, reinforcements were sent in dribbles, such as a coy of Royal Irish and coys from the Theatre Reserve based in Cyprus as well as 2 Royal Gurkha Rifles. The situation improved somewhat in October 2006: 3 CDO Bde deployed two battlegroups and all the required supporting arms. But the consequences of a policy of minimal manpower were already evident: at the same time troop numbers were being increased, British forces were withdrawing from Musa Qaleh, due to lack of resources and forces to hold out in the north.

Following the British withdrawal, the Taliban were able to take control of the town from local elders in February 2007. Musa Qaleh became a haven for insurgents. British forces, with ISAF command, carried out raids and air strikes in the region beginning in April 2007, which did little to dislodge the Taliban presence. It took an assault of 4,000 British, Afghan, and American forces in December 2007 to finally clear the town of Taliban forces. This episode created considerable friction between American and British commanders; the British were criticized for withdrawing and allowing the situation to develop as it did.

With greater troop numbers in place (five infantry battlegroups in HLD today) , the British have been able to maintain platoon and coy bases in the Kajaki Dam region, Sangin, Nowzad, Gareshk, Lashkar Gah, and Garmsir, and to re-establish a presence in

Musa Qaleh, to protect the Afghan Government District Centers. They have also established Forward Operating Bases at various locations to support the troops in the area. The British have also carried out strike operations structured around a recon squadron, and attached forces as Manoeuvre Outreach or Mobile Operations Groups (MOGs) which focus on intercepting supplies and personnel coming in from outside the ADZs, as well as gathering intelligence from the local people. Their plan has been to maintain a permanent UK and Afghan presence within these district centers, carrying out patrols and attacks from there to destroy the presence of the Taliban. As one senior practitioner from HERRICK VII stated that ‘this places the population of HLD as our centre of gravity. In short, unless we retain, gain and win consent of the population within HLD we lose the COIN campaign. . . . we will CLEAR, HOLD, BUILD where we can and DISRUPT, INTERDICT, DEFEAT where we cannot.’ They have been supported most recently by the welcome deployment of the USMC 24 MEU, to assist with efforts in the Garmsir region and southern HLD province.

Overall, the British approach to the COIN campaign in HLD has been more effective than their campaign in Iraq. Many commanders recognized that there had been mistakes made in MND SE that they did not wish to repeat. One officer noted in 2006 that ‘many lessons learned...are not new. Common themes from previous UK COIN campaigns and conflicts were all evident in operations conducted in HLD. The key lesson is that we ignore previous experience of such campaigns, and those of our allies, at our peril.’ As of 2008, British Army forces are delving into their own COIN doctrine and history. They are identifying lessons learned from each campaign, and learning the history of their relations with the people of Afghanistan, particularly the Pashtuns, to formulate a base from which to work with and amend as their campaign is fought.

The British operations in HLD are a microcosm of the ongoing issues that have plagued NATO and the US forces in their attempt to pacify the Pashtun belt of RC East and South. The British military, along with relevant departments of HMG, particularly the Foreign and Commonwealth Office and Department for International Development, have been on a steep learning curve over the last three years.

Like us, the British have encountered problems integrating economic reconstruction with their military operations—the comprehensive (or, in US parlance, interagency) approach. They have seen improved results with better planning and security, but issues remain regarding force protection, numbers of people, and allocation of monies for various projects. In particular, the fact that members of other government departments are all volunteers continues to present problems, in both the quantity and quality of personnel. Many British commanders have indicated interest in the new US approach, known as Civilian Response Teams. Commanders have noted that there are recently retired soldiers, NCOs and officers who may be interested in returning to war zones in a different capacity, and who could provide valuable expertise and manpower.

Much work also remains to be done on the mentoring of Afghan National Security Forces. The British and the HLD Task Force were assigned to work with the 3/205 Kandak. Initially, due to the paucity of troops on the first operational tour, the 16 AA

assigned their artillery detachment as advisors to the Kandak, something they had not been trained for. Hence there was much scrambling to get systems up and running. It must be remembered that this regiment, in addition to fulfilling this role, was also providing artillery support for the Bde during the deployment. They did their best, but it is evident that execution of the mission was more or less ad hoc. This experience led the senior command in the UK to assign a dedicated infantry battalion to train and embed with the 205. The Royal Marines and the Grenadier Guards have subsequently served as advisors and ANA actions and reports over the last 12 months have demonstrated their increased ability.

There is one topic of significance that I have not yet touched upon: the Afghan National Police (ANP). Categorically, all commanders and reports highlight major issues with the ANP and their lack of support from the local population. Many commanders feel that much greater efforts and resources are needed to reform and rebuild the ANP. Some commanders have noted the need for local auxiliaries, raised from the Pashtuns in the area, who would be trained and led by Coalition forces to help try to hold the cleared areas. While the efforts of the 2/7 Marines in training the ANP have been commended, many fear that there will not be enough back filling to continue the process.

Another problem that remains is that British military and other government department officials have been accused of focusing only on the problems in HLD, and failing to look to other areas of RC South or East for ideas or lessons to take and pass along within their own planning. There have been numerous references to HLD as HELMANDSHIRE, not a particularly useful approach. There is a need to look over the horizon; to link up efforts in the neighboring provinces within the Pashtun belt; to learn from, rather than repeat the same mistakes with a people that we are trying to win over to the Afghan government.

The British Army has gone through considerable growing pains in HLD, as well as MND SE in Iraq, learning valuable lessons, trying to adapt practices, training, and education to produce better results. It is an ongoing process; they know that there is still a great deal of work to be done in HLD, and that the enemy is always adapting and so they must constantly adapt too.

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