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# ***Securing Afghanistan's future: Reconstruction Task Force operations in Uruzgan Province***



an address<sup>1</sup> to the Institute on 31 March 2009 by

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*In his essay commencing on p. 10 on what must be done to win the war in Afghanistan, Major General Jim Molan observes that it is inevitable that the military will have to deliver reconstruction in the early stages of a counter insurgency campaign; and that this is now happening in Afghanistan. In this paper, Lieutenant Colonel Stuart Yeaman reports on the Australian reconstruction operations in Uruzgan Province in 2008 and their increasing success in winning 'the battle for the hearts and minds' of the local population.*

The Australian reconstruction task force (RTF) is one of a number of commitments Australia has made to stabilise Afghanistan and prevent it from again becoming a haven for terrorist organisations<sup>3</sup>. It is deployed to Uruzgan, a poor, remote province in the nation's troublesome south. Its 300,000 inhabitants live in river valleys and the Tarin Kowt Bowl in the centre of the province, which is ringed by massive mountains.

The bowl accommodates perhaps 150,000 Afghans. Its key towns are Tarin Kowt and Chora. Two major rivers cut through the bowl and sustain the valleys' people and agriculture – fruit, nuts, grain crops such as wheat, and the notorious opium poppy. Predominantly Pashtuns<sup>4</sup>, the people are religiously conservative, very insular, and split 50:50 between the politically dominant Durrani set of tribes and the often excluded Ghilzai tribes.

Taliban insurgents are very active in Uruzgan. The insurgency is based in Quetta in North West Frontier Province, Pakistan, and retains close links with the Al Qaeda of Osama bin Laden. The insurgents enter Afghanistan through Zabul province and spread out into Uruzgan, Kandahar and Helmand provinces. They base themselves in local communities, some of which agree with the extreme Taliban policies, but most of which are coerced with threats and intimidation to provide food, money and support. The Taliban usually deploy in units of up to 30-40 fighters for local defence, although they can

muster 100-200 fighters when required. They have cells that specialise in improvised explosive devices (IED) and suicide bombing. Almost everywhere you drive will be 'spotted' by an observer who is in the paid employ of the Taliban, whose funding comes largely from opium sales and donations made by sympathetic foreigners.

NATO's<sup>5</sup> International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) operations in Uruzgan are conducted under Royal Netherlands Army leadership. The Dutch have a commander (at Colonel level), with a battle group, a provincial reconstruction team, special forces, self-propelled artillery, Apache helicopters, logistics, psychological operations, military police, mentoring teams and combat engineers. As well as Australians, there are commitments from the French (largely responsible for the western part of the province), Czech, Slovak and Hungarian armed forces; and the United States Army Corps of Engineers and Agency for International Development. The United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan also has a small presence in Tarin Kowt.

## **Australian Reconstruction Task Force**

The overall mission for Australian forces in Afghanistan is, as part of the ISAF deployment, to stabilize the Government of Afghanistan in order to deny the use of Afghanistan to terrorist groups. To this end, the 420-personnel Australian RTF operates to a reconstruction plan determined by the Afghan Government and coordinated with the Dutch Provincial Reconstruction Team. Dutch security elements provide a security framework.

The RTF is a small, highly capable team, which provides engineering design, contract management and construction support, and is able to deploy to contested areas. It has:

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<sup>3</sup>Australia deployed a special operations task group (SOTG) into Uruzgan in 2002. A reconstruction task force (RTF) replaced it in 2006. Since then the RTF has been joined by unmanned aerial vehicle and Chinook medium-lift helicopter detachments and the SOTG has returned.

<sup>4</sup>Some 20 million Pashtuns inhabit southern Afghanistan and north-west Pakistan. The Afghanistan-Pakistan border, the Durrand Line, is a long-standing source of contention.

<sup>5</sup>North Atlantic Treaty Organisation

- an **engineer task group**, with construction and combat engineer components and a trade training team;
- a **specialist technical works team**;
- a **security task group** consisting of an infantry company mounted in Bushmaster vehicles, supported by a troop of nine light armoured vehicles (ASLAVs) – three of them personnel carriers and six reconnaissance vehicles, a section of mortars and fire support coordination personnel; and
- a **logistic support group** consisting of a small medical team, stores group and repair workshop.

### Australian RTF Achievements

To date, the RTF focus has been on securing the Tarin Kowt Bowl from the west of the bowl to the township of Chora. RTF1 commenced operations in the main township and to the west; RTF2 continued engagement in Tarin Kowt and expanded operations to the north-east; RTF3 secured Chora and commenced operations in Sorkh Margab on the east bank of the Dorafshan; and RTF4 consolidated at Sorkh Margab.<sup>6</sup> Collectively, the RTFs have re-built Tarin Kowt Hospital; built one and commenced building a second basic health centre; rebuilt and enhanced a health training centre for the Afghan Health Development Service; rebuilt schools, police checkpoints and Afghan Army patrol bases; and constructed many causeways, crossings and bridges.

### RFT4 Operations

I will now describe four operations that RTF4 conducted. RTFs 1-3 performed the same or similar operations in different parts of the country.

**Operation Baray Pul** was a 2 ½-month deployment to the village of Sajawul to construct a patrol base for the Afghan National Army (ANA) and a river crossing for the local community, rebuild a local school, construct wells and build a small community bakery. This deployment severed insurgent lines of communication and, despite the insurgents repeatedly posturing to attack the RTF, only resulted in indiscriminate rocket and IED attacks. The deployment saw Afghan companies for the first time employed well beyond the usual boundaries of the Tarin Kowt city to assist in the transport of stores, well-drilling and construction of buildings and the crossing. ANA engineers also assisted with building the patrol base. The ANA took control of the patrol base when the RTF departed and still occupy it.

**Operation Ubor– E – Janubi** was a 2-week operation to the eastern provinces of Zabul and Ghazni during which Combat Team Dagger drove 400 km to re-build two bridges along the vital Highway 1 and return<sup>7</sup>.

**Operation Pindz Psha** was a 3-week operation in Sorkh Margab, initiating the building of a health clinic, school and bazaar. It was very important as it delivered on promises made to that community by RTF3 and changed the nature of the area, effectively winning the ‘hearts and minds’ of the locals to the government.

**Operation Takht** was the ongoing engagement with the city of Tarin Kowt in which, over four rotations, the RTF has rebuilt the city hospital, the primary school and the high school; improved the city’s defences; completed a causeway to improve local access; enlarged the Afghan Health Development Service training site; and rebuilt the Ministry of Rural Reconstruction and Development compound. In the process, the RTF developed good relationships with local government officials and contractors, resulting in improved construction, oversight, project management, financial accountability and technical standards; introduced systems of open, transparent tendering; and enforced realistic costing of delivered works. RTF engineers negotiated with local contractors to employ youth trained by Australian engineers at the RTF’s Trade Training School. To date, the RTF has invested over \$20 million in Tarin Kowt, resulting in its re-birth as a provincial city with a highly active economy, a palpable sense of confidence, and virtually no security issues. RTF engineers imparted sufficient knowledge and experience that not only was the RTF able to contract local companies to build quite complex bridges and buildings outside the city where previously no companies had felt safe to go, they inspired the local Ministries to undertake their own contracted works to build two bridges, one in Tarin Kowt and one in Chora, without RTF support.

### Lessons Learned

The RTF is involved in both a stability operation and the counter-insurgency fight which extends across the south and east of the country. The two types of operation mutually support each other – a major lesson in itself. The RTF experience has reinforced, or at times required re-learning of, lessons from other earlier conflicts – Malaya, Vietnam, Algeria and recently Iraq – and have validated contemporary United States and Australian doctrine on stability operations conducted alongside a counter-insurgent war. Australian doctrine on ‘adaptive campaigning’ describes five mutually re-enforcing lines of operation – joint land combat, population protection, information actions, population support and indigenous capacity building. These are being delivered by the RTF in conjunction with Dutch and other Australian forces. Our experience is that these are, indeed, the important lines of operation and, when conducted properly, will position political decision-makers to successfully conclude the war. Australia has developed a comprehensive campaign plan<sup>8</sup>, which enunciates the steps that will lead to control of the province. To date, this approach has brought stability to a little over half the population in the province

<sup>6</sup>RTF4 was replaced by a mentoring and reconstruction task force with an additional task – the formal training of Afghan Army elements.

<sup>7</sup>In the process, the Combat Team passed through Alexander the Great’s major campsite on the southern Afghan plain (now Kandahar) and his forward fortress at the foot of the mountains at Qalat.

<sup>8</sup>OPLAN 2012, for which the credit must go to Major General Mike Hindmarsh, recently our commander in the Middle East. Its details are classified.

and led to government/NATO control over the key areas of the Tarin Kowt Bowl, Chora and Dehrawud, with a key presence in the outlying towns of Shahidi Hassas and Chas Uruzgan. Ten key lessons that have been reinforced by our RTF experience are described below.

### ***'Hearts and minds'***

The Afghanistan insurgency is not as coherent as is often portrayed. There are key radical groups based around Pashtu leaders, most of whom live in Quetta, but many local supporters are insurgents more by circumstance than commitment. Many issues drive local communities to take up arms against the central government, but the more important ones are economic necessity, intimidation, and desire for revenge for personal sleight or injury. Lack of employment, absence of government authority, injuries perceived or real done by ISAF, and absence of development, are touchstones used by insurgent groups to seek support. Insurgents pay individuals a pittance to report on movements of government or ISAF forces, transport weapons or ammunition, emplace bombs or fire rockets. Nevertheless, seldom are these things done for hatred or desire to see the Taliban returned – the need for cash often outweighs the potential danger of the task. The first major lesson we learnt, then, was that it was this group we had to separate from the Taliban by winning them over with definable improvements in their living standard, access to education, health, or economic improvement.

### ***Reconstruction***

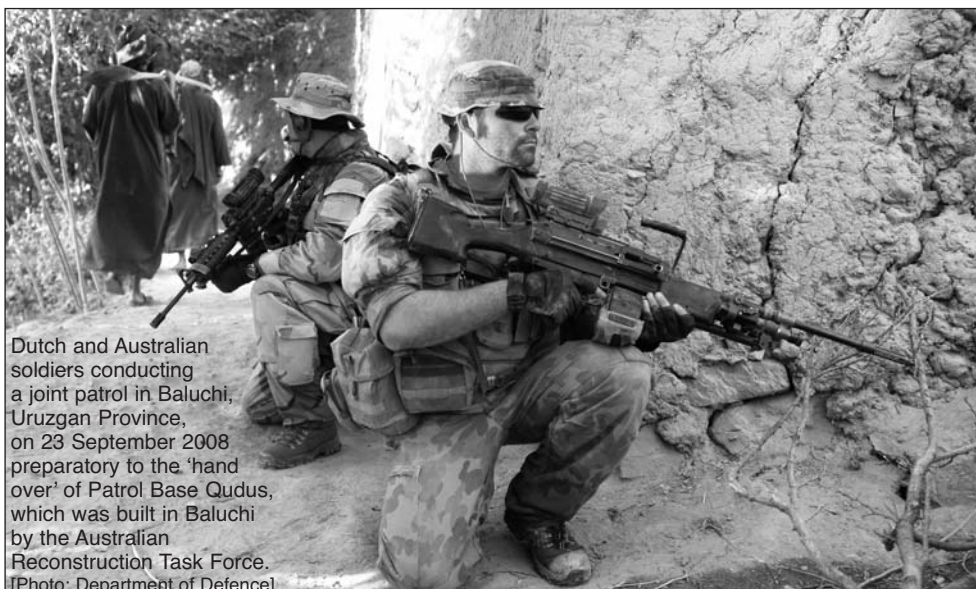
There are no greater weapons for an insurgency than a government's broken promises. We learnt that the reconstruction of key infrastructure was the lynchpin in convincing local communities of government sincerity and commitment. The construction of hospitals, schools, bridges and health clinics improved the life of the local community and demonstrated the presence of the provincial government whose leaders we involved publicly at every opportunity. These attempts to win local 'hearts and minds' for the government are being successful; and by winning back the people of Uruzgan, village by village,

we expect to marginalize the more extreme Taliban elements and bring the incidental Taliban back into the community. This was experienced on a small scale in Sorkh Margab where we were able to use the routes through the village almost with impunity and on a number of occasions locals actually identified IEDs or handed them in to us.

### ***Capacity building***

The RTF also has been successful in building the capacity of local communities. It established a trade training school in Tarin Kowt in which local youth are given basic skills in carpentry, plumbing, block work, generator maintenance and so on. The youth are paid a good wage, achieve a basic standard of skills, learn teaching methods and develop a work ethic. To facilitate skills transfer, Army instructors are understudied by previous graduates who have been working with us for about two years. The RTF guarantees work for its graduates in local firms and, to improve the course, seeks feedback on course content from their employers. The works team invested many hours mentoring the local government engineers and contractors to improve their technical standards of inspection and quality of work, including teaching how to tender and contract works and how to manage those in construction. This has improved the capacity and technical competence of firms; and introduced work practices designed to extend the life of newly constructed buildings in the town to the extent that local engineers have undertaken to build two bridges and a new headquarters building on their own initiative without ISAF help. Lastly, the injection of capital directly into a series of towns has re-juvenated the local economies. Tarin Kowt has gone from a lawless broken-down place to a vibrant community with a large number of merchants and people trading about the city. This effect has also been felt in Dehrawud in the west and up in Chora in the north-east. The works team even convinced local contractors to go beyond Tarin Kowt to Baluchi, Sorkh Margab and Kotwal to deliver on works in those communities, where previously it had been considered too unsafe to do this.

This was so successful that a local contractor was employed to construct the 145-metre Kotwal river crossing and the Sorkh Margab health centre and local school.



### ***Tribal structures***

Tribes in Afghanistan have been the guarantors of security and wealth for individual Afghans for centuries. One reason the Taliban was able to impose itself successfully on the Afghan people was that tribal structures had been decimated by the long war with the Russians and subsequent civil wars. Surviving tribal leaders had lost much of their status. We learnt to deal with

Dutch and Australian soldiers conducting a joint patrol in Baluchi, Uruzgan Province, on 23 September 2008 preparatory to the 'hand over' of Patrol Base Qudus, which was built in Baluchi by the Australian Reconstruction Task Force. [Photo: Department of Defence]

the local tribal leaders and enhance their position within their local community. This made it harder for the Taliban to insert itself into the community – it became the outsider. In Uruzgan, which is very insular, life could be made harder for Pakistani Taliban insurgents simply by enhancing the local leadership.

### ***Size and duration of presence***

The size and duration of your tactical footprint is important. The insurgents faced by the RTF were not the fanatical insurgents sometimes encountered in the western and southern provinces, although that was the group we faced when employed in Ghazni, Zabul and Kandahar. The Afghan insurgents in the bowl followed the tactical playbook pretty well, fading away in the presence of superior forces and only grouping where they sensed a weakness or an opportunity. There were zones that they would choose to defend and sometimes defend vigorously, particularly if their leadership was threatened. However, the RTF seldom deployed outside of Tarin Kowt in anything less than a reinforced platoon size and usually I had the entire RTF forward deployed with 190 or more personnel and the ability to reinforce with strength at any point. This meant we were hardly challenged by the Taliban – we were simply too big. Our platoon commanders and company commanders also made excellent use of their assets and on one of the few occasions where the Taliban shaped to fight, we employed tactical manoeuvre to occupy key positions that made their position untenable and the group faded away. Insurgents, therefore, dropped back to attempts to rocket our positions and use IEDs. The length of time in location was a second vital consideration. We stayed in our forward operating base at Baluchi for 2½ months and then handed over to the Afghan Army. The positions in Sorkh Margab and Chora were occupied for 2–3 months before we arrived and are still maintained. All this has meant that there has been a continual presence in these areas and the effects are palpable, with the insurgent presence curtailed and attacks becoming negligible. This, however, is merely a relearning of the same lesson from Iraq and Vietnam, and earlier in Malaya, where bases in the insurgent heartland were occupied to deny enemy access to the area.

### ***Simultaneity matters***

One of the methods NATO uses at the operational level is the clear-hold-build concept. The linear aspect of this activity – finishing one stage before moving to the next – is the problem with this description and is not what we did. We did all three things simultaneously. We deployed to a site, conducted initial meetings with the local leaders and then stayed. In doing so, we conducted the phases – clear, hold and build – concurrently. We established a basic patrol base and commenced community engagement and in-depth patrolling to interdict insurgents moving in the area. We then constructed a long term patrol base with the support of the Afghan Army and to their specifications as they would later occupy it. At the same time we also began work on a bazaar, school and crossing point for the local community.

We supplied some food and aid to the local community and also helped out with some medical emergencies and in one case diffused a rocket that had been fired at us and landed in a mosque.

### ***Surprise and manoeuvre***

Local communities gain no sense of improved security when counter-insurgent forces simply move on after conducting a clearance, particularly where there has been no challenge to the insurgents' sanctuary areas. The clearance causes the insurgent little concern. Rather, it often gives him the initiative, allowing him to fade away in one area only to strike in a previously cleared one. RTF4 occupied a key location at Baluchi that directly impacted the lines of communication between three insurgent strongholds – we did it unannounced and stayed. This had an immediate impact on Taliban leadership and operations; and caused him concern over which location would be targeted next. Tarin Kowt, which had for long been the obvious insurgent target, was now too difficult to get to. The insurgents were clearly frustrated by this direct challenge on areas they considered heartland and this operation contributed to the Taliban calling off the summer offensive which it had heralded last year.

### ***Insurgent sanctuaries***

Insurgent sanctuaries must be sealed off. The RTF4 operation at Baluchi demonstrated that the insurgent capacity is like a fish that needs the sea of the people to survive. Insurgents must undertake logistic, recruiting and financing operations. These can be targeted and disrupted fairly easily if they can be identified. Cutting off the insurgent from sanctuaries hurts his practical capability, but also affects his will. The capture of Baluchi by RTF4 meant that the Taliban could not move his casualties from adjoining areas to safer zones without being interdicted and the implication for his local fighters was that even a wound could be a death sentence. However, the one issue that continues to plague the Afghan situation is the presence of Taliban sanctuaries in Pakistan. Whilst RTF4 could do many things, it could not deal with those sanctuaries. While they are an exceptionally difficult issue to deal with, the problem in Afghanistan would disappear overnight if the sanctuaries in Pakistan were closed.

### ***Information operations – the 'vital ground'***

To the Taliban, information operations are the number one priority over all other lines of operation. Taliban activities are all aimed at presenting the Taliban viewpoint to the world and driving home the key themes in local communities. Where basic information does not cover their requirements, fabrication and lies will suffice; and, if they fail, intimidation and murder will be used. Taliban night letters are infamous for warning locals that they are being watched and any effort to aid NATO will result in instant death. Do not doubt how quickly the insurgent is able to pass information through the tribal network on how well they are doing and how badly NATO is going. And do not underestimate how much interest there is even in rudimentary parts of Uruzgan as to what the Dutch and

Australian public think of operations by their soldiers. Every Australian casualty is claimed and reported within Uruzgan as well as comments made by our senior generals and politicians. Thought pieces in Australian papers very quickly become major evidence used by Taliban insurgents to demonstrate at grass roots level that Australia, or the west, does not have the commitment to stay the distance.

There has been a lot of speculation in the Australian press about how things are faring. I have read a wide variety of opinion on the present situation in Afghanistan that describes itself as informed but is surprisingly unaware of what Australian forces have been doing. Part of my intention today is to overcome that ignorance. What much of this commentary proves to me is there is a wide disjunction between what is happening in the field and what is being portrayed in the newspapers.

### **Operational plan**

I was very surprised when, on my arrival in Tarin Kowt, General Hindmarsh gave me a campaign plan which told me where I was to operate and what to achieve. Commanders are taught that they should make their own plan, putting into practice all their brilliant ideas. I was, however, being told what to do! It is vital in an insurgency with long delivery times, though, that each piece of the puzzle fits into the others over a number of troop rotations. Having worked with the plan for six months, I now think it is absolutely the right plan and is a vital part of the way Australia links the tactical effort with the strategic outcomes. I have no doubt that, if we follow it until 2012, we will have won in Uruzgan.

### **Additional Observations**

**Combined arms operations** work, yet we do not train in combining arms at a low enough level currently. The combined arms capability of a counter-insurgency-trained platoon commander must exceed that of a conventionally-trained platoon commander enormously. Our platoon commanders deployed organisations in the 'three-block' war that were exceedingly complex and highly powered. A usual platoon team included infantry, Bushmaster and ASLAV combat arms, supported where necessary by Apache gunships, 155mm self-propelled howitzers, mortars and a range of aircraft from A10 harriers to B1 bombers. He also usually had an unmanned aerial vehicle, and human and signals intelligence teams or access to them. He had at least one section of engineers, a team of dog handlers and often explosive ordnance destruction assets. The public affairs team was often part of his patrol and sometime he had Australian electronic and print media journalists within his team. He was operating often in built up areas against an enemy that disguised himself as local people and had no hesitation in causing indiscriminate damage using rockets, bombs or IEDs. Counter-insurgency is often thought of as a slow 'hearts and minds' issue that happens with lots of touchy-feely activities and little actual combat. Far from it – counter-insurgency is an extremely high tempo mix of charged issues and is a far more complex and vibrant scenario for a newly-graduated lieutenant than any in a conventional landscape.

**Bushmaster** is an excellent piece of equipment; almost perfect for this conflict. It has won the admiration of those who use it and is far more capable of a wide variety of roles than previously acknowledged. Our convoys were led by two or three Bushmasters with ASLAVs ready in support. Soldiers were confident in the ability of the Bushmaster to protect against IEDs and felt sorry for other nations who had to deploy 'outside the wire' in less capable vehicles. We used the Bushmaster extensively in overwatch and fire support roles and at the centre of most road blocks. Logistically it works well and we even replaced an engine pack in the field after it was flown in by Chinook.

**ASLAVs**, now venerable, performed sterling service, although mechanical difficulties are developing, particularly with the fuel pump. We did not fit rocket screens to our vehicles.

**Human intelligence** is a vital component of counter insurgency. Given another 30 people, I would have made them all human intelligence operators so as to better understand the province and what is going on threat-wise and community-wise.

**Engineer route clearance** is never rapid. It has to be done by brave individuals going over ground slowly trying to come to grips with a well-prepared and dedicated enemy. Our vehicles enabled us to avoid IEDs by using unlikely routes, but where we had no choice of route, the route had to be checked.

**Women's roles in combat** and perceptions related to them have changed. There is no frontline in an operation like this. All soldiers, male and female, in the RTF shared the same risks and threats as each other. Females were expected to be shooter on vehicles, man vehicle checkpoints and do sentry duty behind 0.50 calibre machine guns and Mark 19 grenade launchers. The days of arguing about what women can or cannot do in the Army are over.

### **Conclusion**

We are making a real change in Uruzgan. The improved construction standards, employment opportunities, stimulated economies and rebuilt tribal structures will remain long after we have departed. Indeed, we are winning in Uruzgan and, ultimately, the international community will win in Afghanistan. You are part of Afghanistan's information war, so thank you for the opportunity to explain what is happening in Uruzgan and why it is going so well.

**The Author:** Lieutenant Colonel Stuart Yeaman graduated from the Australian Defence Force Academy in 1990 into the Royal Australian Engineers. He has served with 17<sup>th</sup> Construction Squadron, 1<sup>st</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> Combat Engineer Regiments, and 6<sup>th</sup> Engineer Support Regiment (as commanding officer, 2007-08); on Headquarters 1<sup>st</sup> Division and Army Headquarters; and in the Department of Defence. He graduated from Australian Command and Staff College in 2001 with the Blamey Prize; and was Director of Coordination for Army in 2006. From April to October 2008, he led Reconstruction Task Force – Rotation 4 to Afghanistan.