

**Jump TO Article**



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# ***From mountaineer to dog-face soldier: an Australian's perspective of operations with the United States Army in Afghanistan in 2014 as Deputy Commanding General in Regional Command – East***

A presentation to the Institute on 18 December 2015 by

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Australian Army Afghanistan Deployment 2014

*Australian Army Reserve Brigadier, Phillip Bridie, recounts his experiences in Afghanistan in 2014, first as Deputy Commanding General of the United States 10<sup>th</sup> Mountain Division (Light Infantry) and then of the 3<sup>rd</sup> Infantry Division in Regional Command – East during the transition to Afghan control. By the end of the mission, self-reliant Afghan National Security Forces had taken full responsibility for integrated security in the region.*

**Key words:** Afghanistan; Australian Army; United States Army; International Security Assistance Force – Afghanistan; Afghan National Security Forces; counter-insurgency operations; Regional Command – East; 10<sup>th</sup> Mountain Division; 3<sup>rd</sup> Infantry Division.

It started with a call from the Director General Career Management Army, Brigadier Paul Nothard, on 16 December 2013 as my wife and I were driving home to Sydney after a relaxing weekend in Port Macquarie. We had just been listening to the latest news which reported that the Prime Minister, Tony Abbott, had announced that Australia was pulling out of Afghanistan. Paul advised that he had an opportunity for me to deploy to Afghanistan with the Americans. “Would I be interested?” That Friday, the Chief of the Army, Lieutenant General David Morrison, gave me a call, “Are you sure?” he asked, to which I replied “Yes”; and then he advised my life would change forever, and so it did. I called my employer, Fujitsu, to confirm the deployment was going ahead and they generously allowed me an indefinite period of leave commencing immediately.

A visit to Canberra followed. Then to the United States for a couple of weeks at Fort Drum, New York, home of the 10<sup>th</sup> Mountain Division (Light Infantry), to meet with my team noting that the mission rehearsal exercise had been completed and many were already on pre-deployment leave. Back to Australia to continue my preparation: commence continuous full-time service; onto a week's force preparation training at Randwick conducted by 39<sup>th</sup> Operational Support Battalion; and a weekend at home. Early the next week I was on a plane to the United Arab Emirates for further force preparation at Al Minhad Air Base; and then to Bagram, via Kandahar and Kabul, to commence my duties with 10<sup>th</sup> Mountain Division.

In this paper I will describe Afghanistan in 2014; the significant events that occurred; the role of a deputy commanding general of a division; the operations we

undertook in Regional Command – East (RC-East); and how we defined mission success.

## **Afghanistan**

Afghanistan is a landlocked country bridging south and central Asia. It has an area of 652 km<sup>2</sup>, about 80 per cent of the size of New South Wales, and a population of 31.8 million. The capital, Kabul, has a population of 3.1 million. Ethnically, the country is 42 per cent Pashtun, 27 per cent Tajik and 9 per cent Uzbek; the official languages are Dari (50 per cent) and Pashto (35 per cent). The religion is Islam.

The Islamic Republic of Afghanistan is a democratic republic with a presidential form of government. The bicameral parliament, the National Assembly, consists of an Upper (or Elders') House and Lower (or Peoples') House. For administration, the state is divided into 34 provinces, each of which is further divided into districts. During 2014, the presidency changed from Hamid Karzai to Mohammad Ashraf Ghani and his Chief Executive, Abdullah Abdullah (who was the runner up to Ashraf Ghani in the 2014 presidential elections).

Afghanistan has been embroiled in warfare for hundreds of years. More recently, the Soviets occupied the country for a decade from 1979 to 1989 until ousted by the Mujahidin, although the Afghani Soviet backed regime lasted a few years beyond the Soviet withdrawal as funding was sustained. The country was governed by the Taliban from 1994 to 2001, when, in December, the Taliban were ousted by a United States-led coalition due to their support of Al-Qaeda who had perpetrated the '9/11' attacks on New York and Washington in September 2001. Hamid Karzai was appointed as President in December 2001, an appointment that was confirmed by the 2002 Loya Jirga and then through popular election in 2004.

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An International Security Assistance Force – Afghanistan (ISAF) was created in December 2001 and operated in-country for 13 years before it transitioned to a Resolute Support Mission on 31 December 2014. My period in Afghanistan coincided with the last year of the original ISAF mission. In 2014, the ISAF headquarters (HQ) was based in Kabul and was commanded by a United States four-star officer; firstly General Joseph Dunford (now Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff) followed by General John Campbell. Under HQ ISAF was ISAF Joint Command (IJC) commanded by Lieutenant General Joe Anderson, Commanding General of the 18<sup>th</sup> Airborne Corps. IJC commanded six regional commands, each commanded by a two-star officer. The six ISAF regional commands (RCs) were: RC-South (under United States command, and included the Australian forces); RC-South West (United States); RC-West (Italians); RC-North (Germans); RC-Capital (Turks); and RC-East (United States).

### **Regional Command – East**

Covering 120 km<sup>2</sup>, twice the size of Tasmania, RC-East has a population of 7.8 million (30 per cent of the population of Afghanistan) and covers 14 provinces. Its headquarters is at Bagram Airfield. The region had more than 30 ISAF military bases of various sizes – from a strategic base (Bagram) to forward operating bases and smaller special forces bases. RC-East surrounds RC-Capital (Kabul).

RC-East has more than 73,000 Afghan National Security Force (ANSF) personnel of whom over 37,000 are Afghan National Army, including two Afghan Army corps: 201<sup>st</sup> Corps, deployed north of Kabul (based out of Gamberi, near Jalabad) and commanded by Major General Zaman Waziri; and 203<sup>rd</sup> Corps deployed south of Kabul (based out of Gardez) and command by Major General Mohammed Sharif Yaftali.

RC-East is critical to United States interests. It had about 48 per cent of the kinetic activity (significant acts with the enemy) in 2014. It is a strategic hub, enabling entry by air through Bagram and by land from Pakistan through Torkham Gate (Khyber Pass) and internally from the south through Ghazni. It secures the approaches to Kabul – the enemy slip-streams into Kabul from the north-east and south-east; and it shares 1184 km of border with Pakistan. It is also a critical support zone for the enemy.

RC-East includes a number of well-known Afghan places: Torkham Gate (Khyber Pass); Jalalabad, launching place for the attack on Osama Bin Laden; the Kunar (home of Al-Qaeda); Ghazni; P2K (Paktika, Pakiya, Khost); and N2K (Nuristan, Kuna, Nangahar).

### **Command in RC-East**

Due to changing circumstances, I had the honour of serving with three different United States formations during my tenure. 10<sup>th</sup> Mountain Division's term ended earlier than was originally intended and this resulted in a double handover of responsibilities.

From February to October 2014, I was the Deputy Commanding General (Coalition Effects & Transition) for 10<sup>th</sup> Mountain Division (Light Infantry). We had responsibility for the ISAF RC – East, as Combined Joint Task Force–10 (CJTF-10). Major General Stephen Townsend was the Commanding General and Brigadier General Mark O'Neil was the Deputy Commanding General (Operations).

CJTF-10 and RC-East ended mission on 4 November

2014 and the Bagram Security Zone responsibilities passed to 18<sup>th</sup> Airborne Corps, as CJTF-Bagram, who were themselves coming close to end of mission. Other CJTF-10 responsibilities were passed up the line to ISAF Headquarters, which was itself transitioning to the new Resolute Support Headquarters; some down to the new Train, Advise and Assist Command – East (TAAC-E), the new Resolute Support one-star headquarters collocated with ANSF 201<sup>st</sup> Corps at Gamberi, near Jalalabad; and some other responsibilities simply ceased as the Afghans picked up more responsibility. 18<sup>th</sup> Airborne Corps had the United States Forces Afghanistan (USFOR-A) (the national command element) responsibilities and command was passed to Major General Jeff Colt. We kept a substantial stay-behind party from 10<sup>th</sup> Mountain Division of around 60 personnel to maintain the Joint Operations Centre during the transition. During this short period, I was the only one-star officer and thus was the Deputy Commanding General.

CJTF-Bagram and 18<sup>th</sup> Airborne Corps then handed over responsibility for both USFOR-A and Bagram Security Zone responsibilities to the incoming 3<sup>rd</sup> Infantry Division which now formed CJTF-3. Major General Mike Murray was the commanding general and I became his Deputy Commanding General (Operations).

10<sup>th</sup> Mountain Division is a highly experienced light fighting division, one of three belonging to 18<sup>th</sup> Airborne Corps. Based at Fort Drum, in upper New York, it was formed in 1943 for fighting in high altitudes and cold climates. The division was reformed in 1985 and since then had been on back-to-back operations from Somalia, through Haiti, Bosnia and Herzegovina, to Afghanistan and Iraq. This was the fourth time the division's headquarters had been in Afghanistan and once, in 2008, it deployed to Iraq. It was the first two-star headquarters at Bagram in 2002 and the last under ISAF and US Operation Enduring Freedom in 2014. In its previous tour, 10<sup>th</sup> Mountain Division had commanded RC-South and thus Australian force elements. The majority of experienced United States officers and senior soldiers had worked with Australian forces and all had fond and respectful memories of that interaction.

3<sup>rd</sup> Infantry Division (“Dog-Faced Soldiers”) has a distinguished history going back to World War I where General Pershing named it the “Rock of the Marne” after its gallant defence against the German offensive in July 1918. This record continued through World War II, Korea, Vietnam, and Iraq – the headquarters had deployed to Iraq four times. This was its first deployment as a headquarters to Afghanistan.

These three headquarters were United States ones, but had a coalition presence, including Polish, Czech, Jordanian, Georgian, Canadian, United Kingdom, Romanian and Afghan staff and/or forces assigned. I was the one Australian in the headquarters although we did have a couple of others with assigned units.

### ***The role of Deputy Commanding General in RC-East***

The United States uses the position of deputy commanding general (DCG) of a division to provide ‘general officer’ oversight of a number of staff areas and responsibilities as assigned. A DCG has responsibility for ensuring these areas perform and enable the mission. The commanding general would reach down to the staff when he needed.

My responsibilities varied slightly under each of the three commands. They were broad in nature and tended to build, and become more operationally focused with CJTF Bagram and CJTF-3. This was due to USFOR-A responsibilities being primarily in the United States national domain, although 10<sup>th</sup> Mountain Division and 3<sup>rd</sup> Infantry Division were pragmatic in application of my responsibilities where they intersected with United States Title 10 responsibilities.

Overall, I was responsible for: sustainment; key enablers; transition and retrograde<sup>2</sup>; and Bagram management and operations. These responsibilities included:

- base realignment and closure – transfer;
- sustainment across the spectrum of operations;
- the Bagram installation – including its defence and management (a large part of my responsibilities);
- general-officer oversight of logistics, communications, engineering, resource management, civil-military integration, safety, garrison command, garrison defence, force protection, air, and pertinent plans outputs;
- Afghan National Security Force (ANSF) development;
- standing up the Joint Operations Centre for CJTF-B/3;
- operations for CJTF-B/3;
- chair a number of boards associated with responsibilities;
- accident investigations, including aviation accidents;
- civilian casualties oversight; and
- team leader for major incident investigations – a “Green on Blue” attack and a mass casualty event.

It should be noted that the general quality of United States staff officers is high with some outstanding individuals, particularly the cell leads.

### Significant Events in 2014

2014 was a busy year with a number of international and local events that influenced and impacted on operations. These included:

- the Afghan national elections – first, the runoffs in March, then the final election delayed to June between Abdullah Abdullah and Ashraf Ghani, and, due to contention as to the result, the moving of the ballots from around Afghanistan to Kabul and their recounting;
- the signing of a Bilateral Security Agreement between the United States and Afghan governments, leading to a formalised Status of Forces Agreement;
- Pakistan’s offensive in its Tribal Areas which drove refugees, with some insurgents, across the Pakistan border into RC-East – which in turn created a humanitarian crisis for the Afghans and international community to resolve;
- Afghan Forces increasingly taking the lead as CJTF-10 ‘retrograded off’ 20 plus bases (which were transferred to Afghans) and two new bases were established;

- significant reduction across Afghanistan in forces, enablers and equipment and the requirement to retrograde or otherwise dispose of large amounts of equipment and stores;
- transition to the new international mission (from ISAF to Resolute Support) and the United States mission transitioned in turn from Operation Enduring Freedom to Freedom Sentinel; and
- transition to the new Train, Advise and Assist Command (TAAC) – East.

### Afghan National Security Forces

The ANSF consisted of a number of different organisations (pillars we called them): the National Directorate of Security; the Afghan National Army; the Afghan Air Force (more an Army Air Corps than a separate service); the Special Missions Wing, which supports Afghan Special Operations forces; and the Afghan National Police. The Afghan National Police, in turn, had four different component organisations: the Afghan National Civil Order Police; the Afghan Border Police; the Afghan Uniformed Police; and the Afghan Local Police.

As mentioned above, during 2014, the Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF) progressively took the lead on operations. As an indication of this, from January to April 2014 there were 18 reported ANSF unilateral operations whereas a year later, over the same period, the ANSF conducted 337 unilateral operations. The ANSF became noticeably more confident and we in RC-East assessed the ANSF as capable. But there were challenges in integration across the various ANSF pillars – National Directorate of Security, Police and Army – leading to our emphasising the requirement for closer co-operation between the pillars encapsulated in the term “Hamkari” (Dari for “All Together”).

### Operation Mountain Summit

From an Australia perspective, our mission and task (which flowed down to me) was to reinforce and support the United States alliance, contribute to the enablement of the Afghan National Security Forces and defeat the enemy.

For CJTF-10 in RC-East, we conducted a two-phased operation being Mountain Summit (February to August 2014) followed by Mountain Ascent (August to November 2014) – Ascent was a progression of Summit, nuanced to reflect the changes in strategic and local circumstances. The key was encapsulated in the statement “Afghan Success is Our Win” – we were to enable that success.

The threat came from a variety of insurgent groups and other actors including the Taliban, the Haqqani Network, Al-Qaeda, criminal networks and corrupt officials, lone wolves, and, towards the end, ISIS (Islamic State) in the north and south. There was wide-ranging activity throughout the period, increasing as the year progressed – in fact the fighting season seemed to continue into December. The insurgents supported each other when they needed to, particularly across the Pakistan border. The main threat areas were in the east in Kunar and Nangahar provinces and on the Pakistan border and facilitation routes.

The insurgents had success with: high-profile attacks in Kabul and on the National Directorate of Security headquarters in Jalalabad; vehicle-borne improvised explosive devices; suicide bombers; indirect fire from 107 mm rockets and occasional mortar attacks; direct small arms fire (very

<sup>2</sup>In United States military doctrine, a retrograde movement is any movement of a command to the rear, or away from the enemy. It may be forced by the enemy or may be made voluntarily. Such movements may be classified as withdrawal, retirement, or delaying action.

common); and surface-to-air fire on aircraft from approaches to airfields. There were about 50 indirect-fire rocket attacks on Bagram in the nine months from February to October while 10<sup>th</sup> Mountain Division occupied the base – sometimes multiple rockets were employed in each attack, but mainly only ones and twos were used.

As we transitioned bases to Afghan control, the number of bases tended to increase. This also tended to fix the ANSF in place, as they deployed forces to protect and maintain those bases. This, in turn, reduced the amount of forces they had available for manoeuvre.

As the ANSF took the lead, attacks on coalition forces reduced significantly. Indeed, more than 80 per cent of attacks were on the ANSF, with about 5 per cent on local nationals.

The elections in April and June were followed by ballot recall from across the country. The elections were a real test for the ANSF and they led throughout – we deliberately kept a low profile. Enemy activity on election days spiked significantly each time. Election security operations demonstrated the ANSF's ability to execute mission command and synchronise integrated security operations when sufficiently motivated and focused – they seized the initiative. The response from the population was inspiring in adversity and proof of their willingness to support the democratic process.

### Operation Mountain Ascent

The mission and intent of CJTF-10 was morphed and refined from Mountain Summit to Mountain Ascent, with Ascent being effective from the start of August 2014. Ascent's purpose became: to support a competent, confident and integrated ANSF capable of full security responsibility.

We lifted our forces off Afghan brigades and thus removed our face-to-face advice at that level during this period. Our effort shifted to corps-level and above. This was consistent with Afghans taking more responsibility; indeed, taking the lead. We also withdrew from 203<sup>rd</sup> Corps (south of Kabul) while maintaining a fly-to-advise capability. The operating principles that we followed included:

- Afghans must feel responsible for the security of Bagram Airfield.
- Maintain ANSF operational tempo during the Afghan government's transition of power.
- Maintain an operational reserve – overwatch gaps.
- Withdrawals are an operational manoeuvre. Do not thin lines. Surge operational support on closing bases.
- Balance retrograde velocity with operational requirements; identify risk to mission associated with equipment turn-in.
- RC-East supports retrograde operations as a team: conventional, special operations, interagency forces *etc.*
- Phase transition of headquarters functions: early, intermediate, late – warfighting tasks are a late transition.
- Any security operation will have a distinct, designated commander.
- Continue to advise where we can and should; maintain relationships where we don't advise.
- What is the last thing we must do? Backward plan timeline from there.

- Stop doing key tasks early when you still have resources to guarantee the transition.

### Success in Regional Command-East

In any operation it is important to envisage what mission success looks like. CJTF-10 did so from the start of its mission and, like the progression of the mission from Summit to Ascent, our picture of success was modified over time based on experience and changed circumstances as follows (with the italicised words representing the changes from February to August).

Achievement by December 2014 in RC-East of:

- A *self-reliant* ANSF have full responsibility for *integrated* security in RC-East and can secure the capital.
- Al-Qaeda unable to operate *effectively* from RC-East; other insurgents unable to defeat the ANSF.
- Secure (*acceptable*) elections and transfer of power occur in RC-East without *significant* coalition support.
- Constructive ANSF-Pakistan military relationship along the RC-East border changed to *ANSF respond appropriately to cross-border incidents along the RC-East border.*
- RC-East retrograde complete; Resolute Support set in place.
- Mission command transitioned to Resolute Support headquarters, United States Forces Afghanistan and TAAC-E, and Bagram Airfield mission command set.

### Conclusion

Serving as a deputy commanding general on a United States infantry division headquarters while on operations in Afghanistan was a remarkable experience and opportunity.

During 2014 in Regional Command – East, we considered that “Afghan success is our win”. By the end of the mission, self-reliant Afghan National Security Forces had taken full responsibility for integrated security in our region; and their capability was evidenced by their success in managing the elections in April and June and the successful transition of power to the new President.

**The Author:** Phillip Bridie graduated from the Royal Military College Duntroon in 1981 into the Royal Australian Armoured Corps. He served in the 2<sup>nd</sup> Cavalry Regiment and 1<sup>st</sup> Armoured Regiment before transferring to the Army Reserve in 1987. On promotion to Major in 1990, he served as a squadron commander in 4<sup>th</sup>/19<sup>th</sup> Prince of Wales's Light Horse. On promotion to Lieutenant-Colonel in 1998, he commanded the 1<sup>st</sup>/15<sup>th</sup> Royal New South Wales Lancers for three years. In 2006, he participated in the Senior Officer Development Programme travelling to England and Israel to study complex military operations. In 2007, he was promoted to Brigadier and, from 2009 to 2011, he was Commander 8<sup>th</sup> Brigade – a term which culminated in the operational generation of Timor Leste Task Group 3. For his service as Commander 8<sup>th</sup> Brigade, he was appointed to be a Member in the Military Division of the Order of Australia (AM). In 2014, he deployed on operations to Afghanistan with the US 10<sup>th</sup> Mountain Division (Light Infantry) and later the 3<sup>rd</sup> Infantry Division as a Deputy Commanding General of Combined Joint Task Force 10 in Regional Command East. For his service in Afghanistan, he was appointed to the United States Legion of Merit and was awarded the NATO Meritorious Service Medal. [Photo of Brigadier Bridie: the author]