

Operation Medusa: The Battle For Panjwai

Part 1: The Charge of Charles Company

by Adam Day



PHOTOS: DND; CHARLES COMPANY; ADAM DAY

A Canadian soldier ducks as a helicopter lifts off during Operation Medusa. Inset top: across the Arghandab River, the area around the white school burns as the Canadians attack. Inset bottom: the town of Bazaar-e-Panjwai with Mar Ghar in the background.

Within sight of the infamous white schoolhouse, epicentre of the insurgency in Kandahar province, the hastily assembled Canadian force entered the kill zone. An enemy signal flare shot up across Charles Company's lead elements and there aren't many polite words to describe what happened next.

Rick Nolan died. 7 Platoon's warrant officer, its heart and soul, was sitting in the passenger seat of a lightly armoured G-Wagon when a rocket-propelled grenade came crashing through the windshield. Sitting in the back seat were a medic and an Afghan interpreter, both badly wounded. Corporal Sean Teal, dazed but mostly unhurt, jumped into a hail of bullets and went to find help. The G-Wagon never moved again.

Shane Stachnik died. The engineer sergeant was standing in his armoured vehicle's air sentry hatch when an 82-mm recoilless rifle round blew them apart. Most inside were wounded or unconscious and the vehicle went radio silent. Call sign Echo 3-2 was out of the fight.

The enemy were hidden in their trenches and fortified buildings, firing from

three sides. The Canadians were enveloped. Bullets kicked up dirt cinematically. Rockets screamed in. Every Canadian gun that could still fire blasted away at the muzzle flashes in the distance.

A Canadian armoured vehicle, full of wounded and dead, reversed at high speed out of the kill zone only to crash backwards into a ditch, where it was hit by several RPGs. Call sign 3-1 Bravo was stuck and dying. It never left the ditch.

The radios were full of screaming voices, some calling for medics, some just looking for help. As the firing and explosions continued, many soldiers began helping their wounded friends, focusing on their own rescue mission, fighting their own war. Time got all messed up. It went too fast or it went too slow; hours seemed like minutes and some seconds took forever. Wounded men crawled across the ground looking for cover. Everywhere there were acts of unimaginable courage.

Yet more would die. Private William Cushley, legendary joker, friend to seemingly everybody, was killed alongside 8 Platoon's warrant officer, Frank Mellish, who came forward to see if he could help after he heard his friend Nolan was in trouble.

It went on and on for hours. An officer sprinted across open ground armed now only with his pistol, looking for his comrade. The enemy kept firing. The company sergeant major went down.

They fought through one calamity after another. And the wounded piled up. Some were hit more than once. Others were wounded in ways that couldn't be seen.

Through it all the calm voice of Charles' commander, Major Mathew Sprague, himself under fire, came over the net, directing his men through the chaos, calling in air strikes and artillery. But the enemy was dug in too deep and hidden too well. They poured unrelenting, if poorly aimed, fire on the trapped Canadian force.

When an errant 1,000-pound bomb, dropped off target by a coalition aircraft, came bouncing through the Canadian lines and ended up right in front of them, there was little left to do but retreat.

Captain Derek Wessan radioed Sprague at call sign 3-9er. "We've gotta get the f--k out of here," he said. "And then we've gotta blow this place up."

Of the 50 or so Canadian soldiers that went into the kill zone that day, no fewer than 10 were wounded, four were killed and at least six became stress casualties.

Even now, even with a year's worth of hindsight, it's still hard for any one person to say exactly what happened that day.

What's known for sure is that five soldiers in that fight received Canada's third highest award for bravery--the Medal of Military Valour--while another, Corporal Sean Teal, received the Star of Military Valour--Canada's second highest award, just beneath the Victoria Cross. One other soldier was mentioned in dispatches.

The ambush at the white schoolhouse took place Sept. 3, 2006, on the second day of Operation Medusa, NATO's first-ever ground combat operation, and Canada's largest combat operation since the Korean War.

That it was a huge battle fought heroically against long odds is clear. But what's less well known are the controversial circumstances that prefigured the battle. This was a struggle that saw a general's strategic instinct--his feel for the shape of the battle--lead him to abandon a carefully laid plan and overrule his tactical commanders in the field in order to send Charles Company on a hastily conceived and ultimately harrowing attack against a numerically superior enemy in a well-established defensive position.

That story, and more, will be detailed here, in Legion Magazine's three-part report on the Battle of Panjwai, which begins with the background to Op Medusa and the behind-the-scenes controversy that shaped the deadly Sept. 3 attack.

Op Medusa was the largest operation in Afghanistan since 2002 and it was intended to disperse or destroy the hundreds, if not thousands, of insurgents that had gathered about 20 kilometres southwest of Kandahar city, in a district called Panjwai.

In 2006, Panjwai was the insurgency's simmering heartland. For a whole generation of Canadian service members, the mention of Panjwai will almost certainly conjure hard memories of small villages and complex defensive terrain, intractable hostility and endless roadside bombs. Of the 66 Canadians killed in Afghanistan since 2002 (as of July 10, 2007), almost half died in Panjwai.

Panjwai is the spiritual and literal home of the Taliban movement. It's the birthplace of their as-yet-unaccounted-for leader, Mullah Mohammed Omar, and the place where the movement began in the mid-1990s.

The district is centred on the Arghandab River and the town of Bazaar-e-Panjwai. Bordered on the south by desert, Panjwai is dominated by a few massive, singular mountains--Masum Ghar and Mar Ghar.

Since the 2001 invasion of Afghanistan, Kandahar province had been mostly an American responsibility. When the Canadian battle group moved south from Kabul to Kandahar in early 2006, they discovered quickly that Taliban activity was high, and it was centred in Panjwai.

Throughout the first six months of the new mission, the first rotation--largely comprised of soldiers from the Princess Patricia's Canadian Light Infantry--routinely fought insurgents in and around Panjwai.

Op Medusa was meant to change all that. It was going to be a decisive victory in the Battle of Panjwai.

Brigadier-General David Fraser controlled Medusa from his headquarters at Kandahar airfield, the sprawling coalition base just outside Kandahar city. Fraser was not only Canada's highest-ranking man on the ground, but he was also NATO's commander in southern Afghanistan.

Out in the field, the battle group was commanded by Lieutenant-Colonel Omer Lavoie, the tough-talking commander of the 1st Battalion, The Royal Canadian

Regiment, a man described by several of his men as a soldier's soldier. The Canadian component of his force was comprised of the 1RCR, a complement of 2 Combat Engineer Regt., 2 Royal Canadian Horse Artillery, medics from 2 Field Ambulance and various support staff for a total of about 1,050 Canadians.

While trouble had been brewing in Panjwai for some time, when Lavoie and his RCR battle group arrived in Kandahar in early August 2006, just as NATO was taking command from the Americans in the south, the situation there reached a critical point. Expecting to conduct a counter-insurgency campaign in Afghanistan, Lavoie was surprised to discover that a threatening number of enemy fighters had gathered just outside Kandahar city.

"We took over right on the threshold of the transition to NATO," said Lavoie. "So I think the Taliban decided that they would either test or show that NATO didn't have the resolve to conduct combat operations to the extent that U.S. forces did."

Within hours of the Aug. 19 ceremony that marked his assumption of command over the Canadian battle group, Lavoie got a first-hand look at the real situation in Panjwai.

A few days before, Lavoie had ordered a small company-sized force to go camp out on the high point Masum Ghar and observe the area for enemy activity.

Three hours after taking command, at about 7:00 p.m., Lavoie received a message that between 300 and 500 insurgents were attacking his force out at Masum Ghar. "What happened, of course, was the Taliban, seeing our vehicles up on our hill and not liking the idea, decided to launch a fairly significant attack," said Lavoie. "I finally got forward to the position at about 4:00 a.m. In the end we killed about 100 Taliban and took no friendly casualties, so it was a good way to start off.

"But the significance of that was that it sent a very strong message to us, and by extension NATO, that if they could mass that size of an attack there was a significantly greater proportion of enemy in that area than was anticipated, based on what our predecessors had noted; so that battle of Panjwai on August 19 was the precursor to Medusa.

"Almost immediately I was called back to the brigade commander (Fraser) and given a warning order to anticipate having to conduct a major combat operation in the Panjwai area to defeat and push this sizable enemy element out--so Medusa started from my perspective right at that time."

Back in Kandahar, Fraser too noted the shift in Taliban tactics.

"We also found out the Taliban had changed their tactics. They went from small group hit-and-run to conventional come-and-get-me. Their intent was to prove to the world and the Karzai government that they could take us on. It was the culmination of their 2006 idea, I won't even say campaign plan. It was their idea of how they wanted to finish off the fighting that year, and finish off the fighting in total. They thought they could win it then.

"What they underestimated was that I was onto their plan, I knew what their intent was," said Fraser. "I had determined they wanted me to attack them head on. à la World War I. at enormous cost in soldiers. both Afghan and coalition.

But I would not accept that as an acceptable course of operation.

"So we adapted and wrote a plan to counter their intent, designed to mitigate collateral damage to Afghans and their fields and their huts, and also to mitigate the threat to my soldiers, both Afghan and coalition.

"We circled the wagons, so to speak, around the Taliban, and forced them to pop their head up so we could lop it off."

The plan for Medusa was big and seemed quite solid. In total there would be almost 1,400 coalition soldiers on the ground with the battle group and thousands more supporting them. According to Fraser, he spent much of August working up the plan.

"This was a big effort, from a brigade point of view; I pulled in troops from my entire brigade, which comprised nine nations across four provinces, down into Panjwai because the Taliban were not going to win. I was very firm. I said 'You've taken on the wrong guy if you want to take on Dave Fraser, 'cause I'm going to beat you here.'"

On the ground, there were several distinct forces ready to close on the enemy. Lavoie's Canadian force was Charles Company in the south, coming through Bazaar-e-Panjwai, with Bravo Company in the north, fighting southward. On one flank was Task Force 31, comprised of coalition--mainly U.S.--Special Forces and also Task Force Grizzly, an American company. With a Danish squad in position to the west and a Dutch Company patrolling the perimeter to the north, the enemy were pretty much surrounded.

Op Medusa began at first light on Sept. 2 with an attack on two axes, with the main effort being in the south. There, Sprague and Charles Company, in the main, were to seize the high features around Panjwai--Masum and Mar Ghar--and isolate the town of Panjwai itself. They would advance right up to the south bank of the Arghandab River, but not across.

"At 5:30 a.m., we moved out. The entire operation was based on my H-hour, which I had chosen as 6:00 a.m.--that being the time at which I intended to launch my forces to secure Masum Ghar," said Sprague. "As it turned out, at 6:00 a.m. sharp we had secured Masum Ghar. By 6:15 a.m. I had declared no pattern of life across the river in Pashmul, save for groups of insurgents with whom we began to trade fire."

According to the original plan, having seized the high points around Panjwai and to the north, the battle group would take the next several days to batter the Taliban--who were now trapped in a fairly small area, perhaps five square kilometres--into submission.

However, that carefully prepared plan began to change almost immediately.

"In the original brigade instruction, once I had confirmed that there were no civilians present, a pre-arranged air strike using precision guided munitions was supposed to simultaneously hit between 10 and 20 known insurgent command and control nodes," said Sprague. "For whatever reason, this didn't happen and the strike was cancelled by the brigade."

Nonetheless, on both high points, the Canadians set up firing lines of armoured vehicles and proceeded to blast away at targets of opportunity across the river

vehicles and proceeded to blast away at targets of opportunity across the river throughout the morning and afternoon of Sept. 2.

"The intent then," said Lavoie, "once that area was seized and the enemy was hemmed in from the north and the south, was to continue to engage the enemy for the next three days with primarily offensive air support but artillery and direct fire as well, in order to, from my perspective, determine where the enemy actually was, and to degrade the enemy's ability to fight before we actually committed the main force into the attack."

And it was quite a place to attack. If Kandahar is the strategic centre of Afghanistan, and the Panjwai district is the key to Kandahar, then the area around the town of Bazaar-e-Panjwai, which includes the small village of Pashmul, is at the very heart of the whole situation.

This, roughly speaking, was Objective Rugby--the area just across the Arghandab River, centred on the white schoolhouse, where Charles Company would cross the river to be ambushed in just a few hours.

Objective Rugby was a place the Canadians knew well. On Aug. 3, 2006, the PPCLI was involved in a hellish battle at the white schoolhouse that led to the deaths of four soldiers--Sergeant Vaughn Ingram, Cpl. Christopher Jonathan Reid, Cpl. Bryce Jeffrey Keller and Pte. Kevin Dallaire--with six more wounded. Also during that fight Sgt. Patrick Tower was awarded the first Canadian Star of Military Valour.

"This was the ground the enemy had chosen to defend," said Fraser, who, having been in command on Aug. 3, just one month prior, was well aware of what happened that day. "Rugby was where we assessed that the Taliban wanted us to fight them on. That was their main battleground. Their whole defence was structured to have us coming across the Arghandab River in the south and fight into Rugby. And the schoolhouse was the area in the centre, where there were big killing fields to the east and the north."

Given the recent history of Objective Rugby, and the evident buildup of enemy forces in the area, the battle group was looking forward to taking their time before going across into Taliban territory. According to the plan, they had lots of time.

"There were a series of deceptions and feints planned in those three days to cause the enemy to react," said Lavoie, "so that we would be able to see where he was so we could plan the final attack."

But this was not to happen. The plan was about to change.

At about 2 p.m. on Sept. 2, Fraser visited Masum Ghar to check out the situation. At that point in the afternoon, insurgent activity had tapered off.

Seeing this, Fraser gave the order to cross the Arghandab. While many of the guys on the ground were wary of heading off into enemy territory with so little preparation, shortly after, as ordered, Sprague led 7 Platoon and an engineer detachment out into the riverbed to map out the crossing.

The order then came down to leave 7 Platoon camped in the riverbed for the night. This was duly arranged, and the platoon began to hunker down. However, a short time later a conference of senior leaders at Masum Ghar decided there was no tactical advantage to leaving the platoon dangling out on

decided there was no tactical advantage to leaving the platoon dangling out on the edge of enemy territory, and they were pulled back just as darkness fell.

At about midnight, Lavoie was again ordered by Fraser to launch an attack across the river.

To the guys on the ground, this order made even less sense. But for Lavoie, managing to get that order postponed was no small feat. According to several sources, the conversation about whether it was a good idea to launch a spur-of-the-moment midnight attack into what was probably one of the most heavily defended hostile positions in Afghanistan did become quite animated.

Lavoie got on the radio and told Fraser that to cross now was not a good idea. It was too risky. They didn't know the river's flow rate or its depth, nor were any fording sites marked. And they had little intel on enemy positions.

While Lavoie's stand earned him the undying respect of his soldiers, it was not an easy thing to do.

"(Lavoie) and I had some pretty serious discussions, because we were talking about the hardest fight either one of us had ever done in our military career," said Fraser. "So the fact that we could have a frank and open discussion attests to the level of trust and co-operation we had, that we weren't afraid to speak our minds. And you need that, because as commanders we're dealing with lives of soldiers, and lives of Afghans. We were talking about the big step of going across the river, metaphorically and literally, to finish off the Taliban."

Nonetheless, this argument was merely to get the midnight attack postponed. The orders were now to attack at first light on Sept. 3, still a full 48 hours earlier than planned and without the promised bombardment.

Several questions remain to this day for the men who had to follow out these orders, but they can all be reduced to this: why abandon the plan and bring forward the attack?

Indeed, it's hard to see what caused the need to hurry--the Taliban were trapped and surrounded, it was now just a matter of lopping their heads off. As Fraser himself notes, the very heart of the Taliban strategy was to draw them into costly ground conflict.

As one RCR officer said, it's not like they were racing to save Ottawa from an invading force. "What's the rush?" said another RCR officer. "We know where they are, it's a free fire zone."

There was, in fact, no rush. Though Fraser agrees there was pressure from above to get things moving, he says that wasn't a real factor.

"There was pressure from every quarter. I told people above me that we were going to play this the way we intended to play this. It was gonna take time, and it took a long time."

Instead, the decision to bring the attack forward was based, in large part, on Fraser's appraisal that the enemy had weakened and was ready to be exploited.

"So, the intelligence I was receiving, and also the information I was receiving from my other task force commanders that were part of this battle, not just Omer Lavoie. and talking to Afghans: we were ready. We were at the point

where we could press this thing home. Yeah, we could have stuck to the plan, but, again, you start to ignore the enemy, what he's doing, what intelligence is on the ground.

"You fight the enemy guided by a plan. You don't fight a plan. If you fight a plan and ignore the enemy, you will fail. You will incur lots of casualties and you will fail. A plan only gets you thinking and gets you to meet the enemy. And the enemy has a vote. So, on (Sept. 1) or (Sept. 2), I had decided the situation was changing so that we could attack. I gave (Lavoie) the orders on the 2nd to attack. It was in advance of what the plan said. Well, I don't care about the plan."

Despite the fact, made apparent the next morning, that Fraser's appraisal of the situation turned out to be demonstrably optimistic, the bottom line for the general is that he believes there was nothing to be gained by 48 hours of additional bombardment.

"Well, I listened to what they had to say," he said of his cautious tactical commanders. "I knew a lot of enemy were there. But, you know, you do two more days of bombardment, how many do you kill? How do you know that? You guess.

"No matter if you went in on the 2nd, the 3rd, 4th, 5th or 6th, guess what ladies and gentlemen? It is a difficult thing to cross a river and to go into a main defensive area where the Taliban were waiting and wanted to fight on. It would have been gut-wrenching, whatever day was picked to go across that river."

Gut-wrenching it may have been, but according to the soldiers who did it, it would have been a much different event if they had stuck to the original plan. As Sprague notes, the extra time would have given the Canadians several major advantages in addition to reducing or destroying the buildings that were to give the Taliban such excellent cover and concealment.

"We could have used that time to conduct feints, force the insurgents into reacting to our manoeuvre. We could have used our manoeuvre to draw them out into positions where our firepower could have decimated them and at the very least we could have seen their reactions to our movement."

"The old adage is, 'time spent in recce is seldom wasted.' We never got to do a recce. Therefore, we never had a tactical plan because we never had time to make one."

Despite the arguments of his tactical commanders, Fraser would not be deterred.

"The decision was 'we're gonna go in' and 26 years of experience in seven different operations told me now was the time to go in there and finish this thing off."

In the end, of course, the only thing that was very nearly finished off was Charles Company.

As for Lavoie, he'd made his stand, but orders were orders, and, one way or another, the attack was going in.

"He's my commander," noted Lavoie diplomatically. "And I guess in his mind

he thought that was the course of action to follow."

At first light the next morning, Sept. 3, Sprague gathered his platoon leaders and supporting officers for hasty orders. With less than 15 minutes to make a plan, what was said didn't amount to much more than, 'We're going across. Follow me.' It was to be an old-fashioned WW I-style assault into the guns, albeit on a smaller scale. It was the charge of Charles Company.

So, with little if any battle procedure, no reconnaissance and intel that was either insufficient or wildly wrong, Sprague led his force down the bank and into the river. This was Canada's first company-sized mechanized combined arms attack on a fixed position since Korea, at the heart of NATO's first-ever battle, and it was like nothing they'd ever trained to do. It was rushed and it was risky--doctrine was out the window.

Across the river and onto the far bank, the engineers made their breeches and Charles crawled up into the fields beyond.

They moved into enemy territory, unaware of what was about to happen.

Everything was quiet. It was all to come.

In the next issue: First-hand accounts of Charles Company's desperate fight and seemingly endless misfortune as the unit takes almost 50 casualties in just over 24 hours.

Operation Medusa: The Battle For Panjwai

Part 2: Death in a Free Fire Zone

by Adam Day

For **Part 1: The Charge of Charles Company**, see page 24 in the September/October issue or visit

www.legionmagazine.com/features/militarymatters/07-09.asp#1



ILLUSTRATION: DAVID CRAIG

An overview of Objective Rugby during the battle. 1: Near the white schoolhouse, 7 Platoon is caught in a deadly crossfire where Rick Nolan and Shane Stachnik are killed. 2: Afghan National Army soldiers and their American trainers attack to the north, toward route Comox. 3: The main company position, site of the Zettlemeier attack that kills Frank Mellish and William Cushley. 4: Dismounted from their LAVs, 8 Platoon assaults a series of compounds.

Having just been blown up, Corporal Richard Furoy lay on the hard Afghan earth bleeding, in untold kinds of pain and probably close to shock. Beside him lay the body of his friend, Warrant Officer Rick Nolan. Enemy rounds were tearing up the ground and cracking past, slapping into the burning G-Wagon from which Furoy had just escaped.

The only Canadian soldier Furoy could see was Cpl. Sean Teal, who was frantically fighting off the enemy, who were just there--in the distance--bobbing and weaving in the high marijuana fields near the white schoolhouse, firing fat waves of bullets at the Canadians.

Furoy was the 7 Platoon medic, seconded to Charles Company from 2 Field Ambulance. When he arrived Nolan had taken him under his wing, shown him how to get by. Now Nolan was dead and Furoy couldn't have done anything

how to get by. Now Nolan was dead and Furoy couldn't have done anything about it and the situation was beyond horrible.

Over on the right flank of the Canadian advance, Sergeant Shane Stachnik was already dead and the attack was quickly turning into a self-rescue mission. Furoy kept thinking about his friend. In the midst of battle, he leaned over and squeezed Nolan's arm. 'Sorry brother, sorry,' he said.

Teal and Furoy were alone and their communications were down. Furoy was slipping in and out of awareness. He figured maybe he was finished. His feet felt like they were on fire, and his face was wet with blood. He passed out. But Teal was not letting him go; he brought him back to his senses with the butt of his rifle.

Teal placed Nolan's C8 rifle in Furoy's hands and said "Enemy 50 metres to the front, defend yourself." Furoy did.

Suddenly help arrived. In the maelstrom, Teal had managed to signal the nearest LAV, call sign 3-1 Charlie, that he needed help. Sgt. Scott Fawcett grabbed two soldiers--Cpl. Jason Funnell and Private Michael Patrick O'Rourke--and took off running through the marijuana fields.

Furoy, still lying on the ground, looked up at Funnell and saw tracers flying by his friend's face, rockets flying just overhead. Surely Funnell would die any second, thought Furoy.

Later, Funnell would say he thought the same thing about Furoy, as he watched bullets plow into the dirt around the wounded medic.

* * *

They've been to war, these Canadian soldiers, the veterans of Panjwai; they've been to a place beyond the normal world. They've seen their friends lying wounded on the ground, seen them die. And they've seen their own death: it was right there, in the rockets flying by--the end of everything. It's a place without illusions; a place where fear and courage are the same thing: live or die, you do your duty or you don't. It's a place from which any return is difficult.

Don't feel sorry for them, they don't want that. They are professional warriors and the first thing the men of Charles Company want you to know about the battle for Objective Rugby is that they didn't lose. Not on the day. Not on the mission. The attack failed and it was bloody chaos. Yes. But the task force kicked a mighty amount of Taliban ass that day. The enemy were lined up and hidden, hundreds of them, firing from three sides. And the Canadians went forward, despite it all; they faced up and went into the guns, into the rockets, they attacked.

Charles Company of The Royal Canadian Regiment is the most decorated, most bloodied company in the serving Canadian Forces. By the end of this story the unit will be worse than decimated, but even that's not the end of it. Without exception these men protect their memories fiercely--and they don't tell stories lightly--but they want you to know what they did, what they fought against.

Here is what happened:

It was Sept. 3, 2006, the second day of Operation Medusa and Charles Company was leading a hasty attack straight in the middle onto Objective

Company was leading a heavy attack straight up the middle onto Objective Rugby, a small plot of heavily defended land in the middle of Panjwai district, Kandahar province, Afghanistan.

While this is primarily the story of Charles Company on Sept. 3 and 4, it should be known that Medusa was a huge operation--NATO's first-ever ground combat assault and the biggest Canadian-led battle in more than half a century. The plan for Medusa had Charles Company in the south acting as the hammer, with Major Geoff Abthorpe's Bravo Company in the north playing the anvil. To the east and west other coalition forces--Dutch, Danish, American--hemmed in the insurgents and attempted to block their escape routes. While the Canadian forces were mainly comprised of 1st Battalion, The Royal Canadian Regt. out of Petawawa, Ont., there were sizeable contingents of 2 Combat Engineer Regt., Royal Canadian Dragoons, Princess Patricia's Canadian Light Infantry, an ISTAR (Recce) Squadron led by Major Andrew Lussier and then, of course, there were the men with no names--Canadian and allied special forces--flitting in and out of the shadows.

Medusa was intended to counter the sizeable enemy force that had gathered in Panjwai, just a few kilometres southwest of Kandahar city. Historically, this is notorious land for those foreigners who try to exert influence on southern Afghanistan. The British suffered heavily here as did, more recently, the Russians, who were never able to gain full control of the territory during their Afghan war in the 1980s.

Difficulty in conquering the district comes not only from its inhabitants--the birthplace of the Taliban, home of infamously intransigent Pashtun tribals--but from the terrain itself. Technically, some people call the Arghandab River area an oasis, but that image belies its strange desolation. The Red Desert lies a few kilometres south like a big giant furnace, making the air crispy dry and sucking all the moisture from the land. And so, despite the lush greenery, life is hard, the people are hard, even the dirt is hard.

The landscape around Objective Rugby is a guerrilla fighter's paradise, crafted by literally generations of insurgents to be the ultimate redoubt. There are interconnected systems of irrigation ditches that look pretty much like a deep, wide trench system. Plus, real trench systems and fortified compounds and tunnels and endless bisecting treelines and fields of corn and dense marijuana growing so high you could only see the antennas of the Canadian vehicles as they moved around the battlefield.

And Rugby, centred on the white schoolhouse, was right at the centre of all the insurgent activity. So, it was a tough nut, perhaps the toughest. And everyone knew it. This is not hindsight, it was foresight: several sources report that the Canadian-produced intelligence at battle group and brigade level indicated that Rugby was the enemy's main defensive position in Panjwai. But beyond the intel, the enemy position on Rugby was something proven in Canadian blood on Aug. 3, one month prior, when the PPCLI lost four soldiers in their aborted attempt to take the white school.

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It was early on the morning of Sept. 2 and Charles Company had seized Masum Ghar and Mar Ghar, both highpoints overlooking Objective Rugby and the area around Pashmul. As the RCR LAVs lined up and began blasting insurgent targets across the river, the engineer troops, led by Lieutenant (now Captain)

Justin Behiels, began plowing new routes down into the riverbed.

Looking north from Masum Ghar, Rugby had several key features. A small road festooned with enemy bombs and mines--dubbed route Comox/Vancouver--hemmed in the objective from the east and north. To the west lay the white schoolhouse. And to the north just a few hundred metres was the village of Pashmul proper, which would have to be cleared as well.

But before they ever got to that stage, there were many problems, a great giant stack of problems for Major Matthew Sprague to solve. The initial task was how to get his force across the Arghandab River and onto the objective.

* * *

Now, one thing to know about Sprague is that he is a leader. He doesn't dither or vacillate. What he says will happen, happens. But he has that other quality indispensable to leaders: he cares about his men like nothing else and they know he will be loyal. As a result, his men don't snipe at him, even subtly, and they don't question him.

If you are to get a sense of the battle--the wild misfortune and endless calamity of it all--you have to picture Sprague at the middle of the chaos, trying to orchestrate two things at once: rescue his wounded soldiers from the battlefield and find a way to counter, on the fly, the huge enemy force that had them all trapped and pinned down.

And that's the other thing you'll have to picture, constantly, is what the atmosphere was like there on the ground, with hundreds of enemy soldiers firing insane amounts of incoming from three sides and the even greater amounts of Canadian outgoing fire, including almost constant coalition artillery, close air support and suppressing fire from Charles' 9 Platoon up on Masum Ghar.

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Though the Arghandab River was shallow at this time of year, the riverbed itself was very wide, about 1,000 metres in some places. The force going across was comprised of Charles' 7 and 8 platoons complete, a group of engineers, a small convoy of Afghan National Army soldiers with their American embedded training team, an American route clearance team and Sprague's tactical headquarters, which included a forward air controller to help guide coalition air support.

A lot of the soldiers knew the enemy would expect them to cross here, but the assault force had few options. The only place with overwatch that morning was right there, right in front of Masum Ghar. And they had to avoid Comox/Vancouver, so they were channelled from the very beginning.

They crossed the river without incident, made their breaches and moved up into the fields beyond. Scattered on the ground were the leaflets dropped there by NATO, warning the locals that an operation was coming through. The locals had also been warned over the radio and all the local Afghan troops knew the plan as well. This was no surprise attack.

Before going across, the soldiers had heard from higher that the enemy had abandoned their positions on Rugby. Despite the rosy warning, many of the

soldiers felt something was up, their 'spider-senses' were tingling. But as yet there wasn't a shot fired and no sign of the enemy force hidden a few hundred metres away.

The place they made initial beachhead was about the size of a football field. It was hemmed in to the north and east by route Comox and to the West by berms, ditches and high marijuana fields. Things got briefly confused here, as at first, 7 Platoon had struck off to the north and run into route Comox. Seeing this, Sprague got on the net and ordered them to reorient themselves back toward the school directly. The platoon then passed through company lines to spearhead the attack on the school.

After the engineers made their second set of breaches, 8 Platoon's leader, Lieut. Jeremy Hiltz, (who has since been promoted to captain) stood on the berm that bordered the main company position and watched Nolan ride through the ditch in the passenger seat of a G-Wagon, Nolan jokingly pressing his face up against the glass as if he were trying to escape. Then Hiltz saw Sgt. Shane Stachnik cross the ditch in a crouch. Stachnik gave him a funny look, as if to say 'this is crazy, but let's do it.'

Capt. Derek Wessan gave a quick set of orders to 7 Platoon, who were to move through the engineer's breach and shake out into a battle line with the four LAVs--3-1 Alpha, Bravo and Charlie, plus the engineer section in Echo 3-2 Alpha--slightly in front of the G-Wagon, call sign 3-1 W, which the soldiers who rode in it jokingly liked to call 3-1 'woof,' for the last noise you'd hear as the vehicle was engulfed in flames. They were to advance to within 30 metres of the white schoolhouse, then halt and observe. Wessan, a hulking, tirelessly competent man, would normally have been riding in his own LAV, but it had broken down and was in for repairs, so he rode in the back of 3-1 Charlie instead.

The four LAVs crept up through the breached irrigation canal and into the marijuana fields, which were so dense the drivers and gunners were having a hard time seeing through their sights. Behind them the G-Wagon bumped through the breach, followed by Sprague himself in call sign 3-9er, who'd come forward to add firepower, in case it was needed.

In 3-1 Charlie, Fawcett was observing the situation from the rear sentry hatch and, seeing they were about 30 metres from the schoolhouse, ordered his driver to stop. Seconds later Fawcett saw two things happen almost simultaneously. To his right, Echo 3-2's turret seemed to explode into pieces. He ducked down to report to Wessan what he'd seen. Then, to his left, he could see Teal waving his hands and yelling behind the G-Wagon, which was blackened and smoking.

Fawcett jumped quickly back down from the hatch into the belly of the LAV, where he gave Wessan an update and reported that he was heading for the G-Wagon. "Follow me," Fawcett yelled to O'Rourke and Funnel, before taking off in a sprint down the back ramp.

Running through the marijuana towards the G-Wagon, the noise of the guns was deafening and the enemy fire was shredding the tall plants. It was raining marijuana on the sprinting soldiers.

* * *

Moments before, in the G-Wagon's rear passenger side seat, Cpl. Eurov was

moments before, in the G-Wagon's rear passenger side seat, Cpl. Furoy was leaning forward, trying to get a good look at his digital camera's rear display. He'd just passed the camera to Nolan, who'd taken some pictures and now wanted to know if there were any good ones.

Suddenly everything exploded. Furoy's first thought was that his camera had somehow detonated in his hands. But it hadn't. It was probably an RPG and it hit the front of the G-Wagon and exploded through the windshield, right into Nolan's face and chest. Shrapnel tore Furoy's shoulder apart and badly wounded the Afghan interpreter sitting to his left.

Now, with O'Rourke and Funnell treating Furoy and the interpreter, Fawcett and Teal put their attention to fighting off the enemy. Before long, Fawcett ordered his guys to take the wounded back to 3-1 Charlie, which they did one at a time, traversing the distance twice under heavy fire, an act of bravery that resulted in a Medal of Military Valour for both soldiers.

Despite his own wounds, once inside the LAV Furoy began caring for other wounded soldiers, something he would do right until he was evacuated from the battlefield several hours later.

* * *

Fawcett and Teal were now alone with Nolan's body at the G-Wagon.

The incoming and outgoing, literally hundreds of weapons firing at once, was deafening. At the G-Wagon, the rounds were coming in from three sides, even spraying underneath the vehicle. Lying on the ground, Fawcett thought to himself: 'If the enemy rounds are coming under the G-Wagon, then why am I lying on the ground?'

He jumped up and yelled for Teal to do the same and they used the back of the vehicle for cover.

A few dozen metres to their left, 3-1 Bravo's main gun jammed after firing just a few rounds, Master Corporal Sean Niefer sat up in the hatch, exposed to enemy fire, laying down a barrage of his own from the turret-mounted machine-gun. For those who saw Niefer up in the turret, totally exposed as bullets and rockets flew in against him, this image would become almost emblematic of the whole battle. Niefer received the Medal of Military Valour.

On the right flank, Echo 3-2--Stachnik's LAV--was looking pretty bad. For a few scary moments, everyone pretty much thought the vehicle was a catastrophic kill. Its turret had not only been blown to pieces, but it wasn't moving and there was no radio traffic coming from it.

Almost immediately, a rescue operation was launched to get Echo 3-2 hooked up and pulled out of the kill zone. Just as a soldier was about to attach the cable, Echo 3-2's driver regained consciousness and had the presence of mind to reverse out and drive up the rear of the battle line, leaving the soldier holding the cable, standing in the field.

The first place Echo 3-2 stopped was at Sprague's LAV, where Cpl. Derick Lewis and M.Cpl. (now Cpl.) Jean-Paul Somerset jumped out to begin treating casualties. Lewis climbed up onto the LAV and after finding Stachnik was dead, moved on to begin treating the wounded crew commander.

Just moments before, Lewis had seen something very rare--an actual enemy fighter running in the open, just about 75 metres in the distance. He raised his rifle and put his eye to the sight and fired. His first shot missed. He fired again, and again. The enemy fighter crumpled and fell dead.

Some guys remember well, and for some it gets hazy. Lewis is a whole other story. He remembers these events in crystalline detail, recounting shot-by-shot, second-by-second events like they happened 25 minutes ago.

Now though, Lewis had switched to first aid instead of fighting. Almost out of nowhere, an American soldier, a medic embedded with the Afghan National Army, showed up and began to help with the casualties. Once it was clear they were all taken care of, Lewis volunteered to take the American back to friendly lines and so the two began a massive long-distance run across basically the entire battlefield, some 700 metres each way for Lewis. While the two were pinned down once on the way to the American position, and Lewis was blown off his feet on the return trip, they both made it without a scratch.

* * *

Across the radio, Sprague had begun to organize 7 Platoon into a retreat out of the encircled kill zone and back to company lines.

To this end, 3-1 Bravo pulled up to the G-Wagon and dropped its ramp. Fawcett began dragging Nolan's body towards it. The first soldier out of the LAV saw the situation and stopped dead in his tracks near the bottom of the ramp and the soldiers behind piled into him.

In short order they loaded Nolan inside and were about to take off. Quickly, Fawcett saw it wasn't going to work, the LAV was packed to the roof and there was no room left. Fawcett looked at his fellow section commander, Sgt. Brent Crellin, and made a pretty hard choice. "Get out of here," Fawcett yelled to Crellin, over the sound of battle. He and Teal would stay, fight, try to find another way out.

Crellin hit the switch to raise the LAV's ramp. "Good luck," he shouted to Fawcett.

Teal and Fawcett then moved back to the rear of the burning G-Wagon and began firing at the enemy again.

Despite being in the relative safety of the LAV's armour, 3-1 Bravo was about to find a whole new kind of misfortune. Cpl. Jason Ruffolo was the LAV driver. Now, Ruffolo is the kind of guy you want on your side in a fight. From the look in his eye, the way he holds his head, you just know he's going to be there when he's needed. With rounds crashing off the LAV, Ruffolo took off at speed through the marijuana field and, missing the single breach, slammed heavily into the irrigation ditch, which was eight to 10 feet deep.

At first, when they crashed into the ditch, all Ruffolo could hear were people screaming on the intercom and his immediate thought was that he'd killed the whole section.

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So now things had gotten even more complicated. Not only was 7 Platoon

So now things had gotten even more complicated. Not only was 7 Platoon caught in a wild crossfire, three of their six vehicles were either partially or totally out of the battle.

But this wasn't even the only action going on. Far on the left flank, beyond the kill zone where 7 Platoon was stuck, 8 Platoon was fighting a woolly battle to secure a group of compounds down by the bank of the Arghandab. The platoon had dismounted from their LAVs and were fighting compound-to-compound, kicking down doors and clearing rooms, gunning down enemy fighters.

On the far right flank, the ANA soldiers had been launched into a marijuana field and were fighting north toward route Comox. While undoubtedly aggressive, the ANA were kept kind of quarantined from the main force, basically holding the northern flank, because nobody was sure of their weapons control and the risk of friendly fire was too high.

Meanwhile, back at the G-Wagon, Teal and Fawcett were still in the fight of their lives. At least half a dozen rocket propelled grenades screeched past and the pair were running out of ammunition. With no good options left, Fawcett and Teal took off on a hundred-metre sprint to get back to 3-1 Charlie. They made it in one piece, despite the odds. Teal received the Star of Military Valour; Fawcett the Medal of Military Valour.

* * *

There is more than one kind of insurgent in Panjwai. First, there are the part-timers. These guys are mostly farmers or young men with nothing better to do. Maybe the Taliban pays them to fight, maybe drug lords pay them to fight, maybe they chose to fight for their own reasons. In general, these guys are amateurs. They do things like fire an AK-47 at an armoured column and then try to get away by running across an open field. LAV gunners have little trouble picking these men off, so, they don't last long.

A rough estimate going into Op Medusa was that maybe as many as half of the bad guys in the district were part-timers. A big part of the reason for this is that, through a series of blunders and corruption scandals, the local government had angered everybody to the point that Panjwai was nearly in open rebellion.

However, at the other end of the enemy spectrum there are the A-listers. The all-star team. These guys have command and control. They have tactics. They stage co-ordinated attacks. They're devious and they're not that easy to kill. By all accounts, the force currently pounding Charles Company were the serious shooters, the A-team.

Intel reports would later confirm that the Canadians blasting away at the muzzle flashes did kill dozens of these guys--maybe more, including one reputed medium-level commander.

* * *

With the evacuation of the forward position underway, the objective was now all about extracting 3-1 Bravo from the ditch.

In the ditch, Ruffolo, could hear the 'ting ting ting' as small arms fire hit the LAV and he felt the vehicle rock as first one and then a second RPG slammed into the rear hatch area.

The plan was to tow it out using a dozer. In order to do this, two soldiers were ordered to get out and hook up 3-1 Bravo's tow cable. In the confusion though, they couldn't find the cable, which had been stored on the front of the vehicle. Seeing this, and not wanting to stay trapped in the kill zone any longer, Ruffolo himself got out of the driver's seat and, exposing himself for several perilous minutes, hooked up the cable. But the heavy vehicle wouldn't budge, it was no use--the LAV wasn't moving. The order came down to abandon 3-1 Bravo, and slowly the men trapped in the back--several suffering badly after the crash--began to crawl out the hatch as the ramp couldn't be lowered. Ruffolo got out again, this time to unhook the tow cable from the LAV, allowing the dozer to churn off, the cable dragging behind it.

Ruffolo, now without a vehicle, ran up to another LAV, but they told him there was no room left. So, with no other options, he ran all the way back through the breach to the company position on his own.

In 3-1 Charlie, which was on scene to help the recovery, Wessan turned to Fawcett and said he was going to see if everyone escaped from 3-1 Bravo. Fawcett swears that Wessan covered the 20 metres to the irrigation ditch in a single leap.

Nolan's body was still in 3-1 Bravo, stuck in the ditch.

* * *

Now, just as Sprague was gearing up for the counter-attack, two things happened almost simultaneously which effectively cost the Canadians the battle for Objective Rugby.

Back in the main battle position, a hasty casualty collection point had been formed by Cpl. Lewis in the shelter of the big Zettlemeyer front-end loader and a big loose pile of dirt. While still under heavy enemy fire, the place seemed safe enough that no one really expected what came next.

The big round--probably from an 82-mm recoilless rifle--crashed into the side of the Zettlemeyer. The blast killed Pte. William Cushley pretty much outright. Funnel felt the heat of the blast and the next thing he knew he was on the ground 15 feet away. Lewis too caught the blast hard and was knocked sprawling, his arm and leg torn open. Company Sergeant Major John Barnes was also knocked down by the concussion, heavily injured. WO Frank Mellish was there too, he'd come around from 8 Platoon's flank to see if he could help extract Nolan. By all accounts best friends, there was no way Mellish was going to stay back in this situation.

Mellish was blown back away from the Zettlemeyer, badly wounded. Ruffolo had just arrived on the scene and immediately began first aid, out in the open, with no cover and enemy bullets cracking all around. Ruffolo tried to stop the bleeding, he worked furiously, but after a few minutes he realized Mellish was gone.

Just a few feet away, Funnel picked himself up off the ground after the blast and immediately saw Lewis crawling, obviously badly wounded, in the wrong direction.

"I'm hit. I'm hit," Lewis yelled.

Funnel yelled at him that he was going the wrong way, going into the bullets instead of behind cover.

Just then, already wounded, a bullet ripped into Lewis' arm, jerking it out from under him. His first thought was 'F--k, I just got shot' and the next thing he knows someone is grabbing him around the waist, lifting him up and dragging him to safety. It was Funnel.

* * *

At about the exact same moment the rocket hit the casualty collection point, Sprague heard the 'bombs away' call as a coalition aircraft dropped in on a nearby enemy position. Everybody knew the bomb was coming, they just didn't expect the 1,000-pound-laser-guided weapon to land on their heads. But it did, pretty much. The bomb landed just north of the main position and bounced in toward the ANA and the Canadians, coming to rest just metres in front the company's tactical headquarters.

Sprague saw it and his first thought was that it was over for the lot of them.

In the engineer LAV, the driver called up Lieut. Behiels, the engineer leader, on the intercom.

"Um, sir, a giant bomb just landed right in front of us," he said.

"We're still alive," Behiels replied. "Keep firing."

No explanation was ever found for what went wrong. It was just one of those things.

* * *

With the right flank closed off by the 1,000-pounder, and the casualties piling up, there were few choices left except to get out and try again later. But there was one more thing to do. Sprague wasn't going to lose any more men retrieving Nolan's body, but he wasn't going to leave him there either.

So on his orders, pretty much the entire force faced forward and laid down an absolute barrage of suppressing fire, leaving just one thin corridor for an 8 Platoon LAV to make the perilous run up to 3-1 Bravo and retrieve Nolan's body.

That was the last piece of business Sprague thought they could accomplish, and with that done, they started to withdraw back to the middle of the Arghandab.

* * *

As everyone was gathering up for the withdrawal, there was one further, final misfortune. As Hiltz was doing a check on the men of 8 Platoon, to ensure everyone was accounted for, he discovered that one section was still out in the compound on the left flank. One way or another, their section commander had ended up back at the LAV without them and now it was up to Hiltz to go get his men.

With just a quick glance, Wessan, who had appeared suddenly beside Hiltz but had misplaced his rifle in the chaos, signalled he was good to go as well and the

two of them took off.

Wessan hit the berm first with Hiltz still sprinting across the field behind him, cursing the heavy radio in his backpack for slowing him down.

The two officers, platoon leaders, stood on the berm at the forward edge of the position, with enemy bullets cracking past. They could hear the trapped soldiers screaming for help. Hiltz raised his C8 and fired towards the flashes. Wessan fired his Browning pistol and the two of them hoped the covering fire, such as it was, would give the trapped section the courage to get up and get out of there. They did.

Charles Company headed back across the Arghandab and back onto Masum Ghar. During the night they traded fire with insurgents and watched as coalition aircraft destroyed the vehicles they'd abandoned earlier.

* * *

In their official reports on the day--gained by Legion Magazine through Canada's Access to Information program--the military calls what happened on Objective Rugby an ambush. In some sense, that's true, but largely it is not. On Aug. 3, the PPCLI were ambushed at the schoolhouse. Calling Sept. 3 an ambush is sort of like calling what happened at Dieppe an ambush. A small Canadian force was sent on an attack against a numerically superior enemy in a well-established defensive position.

That said, nothing is certain. It's impossible to know whether the decision to commit to the attack on Rugby 48 hours in advance of the schedule cost lives or saved them. However, military minds are trained to grapple with probabilities, and while nothing is certain, it's hard to see how two days of heavy air strikes, direct fire and tactical manoeuvres could have failed to weaken the enemy.

In the end, it just didn't make sense to the soldiers. Here we have one plan, long developed and founded on encirclement, deliberate tactical advance and careful attrition of enemy forces in a well-established free fire zone, working at cross purposes with a run-and-gun frontal assault which depended more on surprise and the enemy's weakness than Canadian strength. While perhaps either tactic might have worked, using both didn't make sense.

The enemy knew the Canadians were coming, because the leaflets told them. There was no attempt at deception because deception wasn't a part of the plan.

The enemy was surrounded, cut off and wildly outgunned. As one soldier said, quietly, as if it were no big thing, 'we held all the cards, and we played their hand.'

Sometimes you get the bear, sometimes the bear gets you.

* * *

Ultimately, the battle that day, in the bright Afghan sunshine, lasted about four hours--the force moved out at about 6 a.m. and the retreat began at about 9:20 am, which is known to be the exact moment Cpl. Lewis was injected with morphine, as it's written on his helmet cover, which he has kept all this time but plans to maybe donate to his local Legion one day.

While the battle cost the lives of four Canadian soldiers and wounded 10 others, if you want to know the hidden cost of this battle, and of this mission, all you have to do is sit down and talk to the veterans and you'd know a couple of things. First is that you can often hear the experience in their voices--they crack and waver a bit when they talk about these events. Second, and this is the dead giveaway, you can see it in their eyes. They look around, down, up at the ceiling, often wincing, as if the story itself was causing pain. Sure, they still laugh, and they tell funny stories about the day, but they describe it almost like it happened to somebody else. Maybe that's what they have to do.

As for the others, the one's who escaped without physical injury, while they don't wear wound stripes on their uniforms, many of them seem to carry that place in their head like it's a piece of shrapnel. While these injuries are unseen, they are no less real.

And while many would like to forget, others want to remember. Like Ruffolo, when he came home he got a tattoo on his neck to remember his buddy Cushley. He takes endless crap for it from the Army, but he doesn't care. He did it for his dead friend, to remember.

* * *

?While Medusa started badly for Charles Company, it got worse the next morning.

In just a few seconds, the pilot of an American A-10 Thunderbolt close air support fighter made a mistake that cost one more life--Pte. Mark Anthony Graham, a former Olympic sprinter--and wounded more than 30 others, some badly, including Sprague himself.

In the early morning haze, the pilot had mistaken a garbage fire lit by the Canadians for smoke from an enemy position and, lacking vital situational awareness, fired his fierce 30-mm chain gun at the unsuspecting target.

When the plane struck, Ruffolo was just over a rise with 7 Platoon. The plane hit 8 Platoon and the tactical headquarters. Ruffolo came running over the hill and saw what looked to him like a mass grave--men lying everywhere, pools of blood, and just unbelievable carnage. He thought the whole platoon was dead.

For Sprague, right in the middle of the friendly fire incident, it was like watching a whole bunch of sparklers going off while he got the crap kicked out of him. What he remembers most is the concussion--or rather the amount of concussion--kind of like getting punched in the nose a hundred times really hard.

Sprague suffered serious shrapnel wounds to the head and body and was evacuated to Germany and then back to Canada, alongside several of his men.

* * *

Charles Company was done. They'd lost their commander, a great chunk of their junior leadership and almost 50 soldiers in total. For a short time there, the unit was combat ineffective, and where it used to be Medusa's hammer, it now largely disappeared. The emphasis would now shift to Bravo Company, the new hammer, striking down on Rugby from the north.

As for Charles Company, not all of its soldiers were out of the fight. Wagon

As for Charles Company, not all of its soldiers were out of the fight. Wessan would stay in the field and his patched together force, against all odds, would be among the first Canadians on Objective Rugby when it eventually fell to the battle group, 10 days later.

In the next issue: *The combat phase of Op Medusa concludes with the story of Bravo Company, coming down from the north to join the remains of Charles on Objective Rugby.*