

Turning it around

COLIN FREEZE, TODAY AT 1:13 PM EST

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I.

“Do you think we’ll be able to turn this around once we get to Sangisar?” crackled the intercom inside the light armoured vehicle.

Inside the dark belly of a LAV one never knows exactly what is going on outside – one merely hopes for the best. The military convoy was travelling to the recently captured village of Sangisar, creeping forward at a snail’s pace of about one kilometre per hour.

The drivers, wary of unseen roadside bombs, crawled to their destination. A friendly military outpost was built just weeks ago in the mud hut village west of Kandahar, said to have once been the home of Taliban leader Mullah Omar. He may be long gone, but his followers linger.

I accompanied Canadian infantry troops moving into Sangisar, who were on a mission. The job was to back up the fledgling Afghan National Army soldiers manning the outpost. Together the armies were to launch a joint operation, a foot patrol to see if they could find any Taliban still lurking in the mud hut compounds and barren grape fields.

But before that happened, however, the Canadians had to get there – no small feat in this part of Afghanistan.

“Do you think we’ll be able to turn this around once we get to Sangisar?” crackled the radio inside the LAV. The question was meant literally. Large vehicles at the head of the convoy didn’t know whether there will be enough of a turning radius at the outpost. Over the radios, the answer came back: Plenty of room.

But inside a LAV, where one has nothing to do but think, the question took on broader implications. NATO forces are finally making headway in the south, into places like Sangisar. But turning around Afghanistan will be no simple task.

Canada’s Parliament is reconsidering the military’s six-year-old mission to the war-ravaged country. Coalition forces easily took the northern capital, Kabul, and its environs in 2001, but never established much of a presence in the poor, Pashtun south – now a hotbed of insurgency. This could be the axis on which the wider NATO mission turns into success or failure.

In the Zhari region, progress is painstaking and gains against the insurgents are measured in increments, much like the plodding progress along the slow road to Sangisar.

II.

“Did you hear the boom?” an infantryman asked me. I wasn’t sure what I had heard.

Ducking behind the mud walls of Sangisar as they swept through the villages, the infantry soldiers had heard an explosion that heralded the death of a comrade. Gunner Jonathan Dion was killed several kilometres away. His tracked LAV had run over an improvised explosive device on the nearby highway, the same morning of the operation was launched into the villages.

Four others in the LAV were injured in the blast. The soldiers in the field didn’t know what they had heard until news of the attack moved on military radios. It cast a pall on the troops searching the villages.

That LAV wasn’t part of the operational convoy. Rather than heading into battle, it was bringing some soldiers away from the front for some rest.

The mugshot of the dead soldier circulated hours later by the Canadian Forces seems familiar. Gunner Dion may have been one of the artillerymen I met when arrived at the Canadian Forces forward operating base in Zhari last week.

Embedded as a journalist the FOB, as it is known, I was allowed to tour of the hardship post near Taliban territory. That included the artillery operation, where gunners took pride in showing off their various projectiles and big guns, speaking of how their munitions were capable of hitting targets kilometres away with astonishing precision. They explained that they usually stick to the base, doing what they can to help forces in the field while trying to avoid civilian casualties.

On the night of Dec. 28, the boom of the artillery was deafening, the force of the blasts spreading dust clouds throughout the base. The gunners were firing flares to light up the dusk sky over Sangisar. Afghan National Army soldiers had reported they thought they were being fired on. They wanted to see the enemy.

The artillerymen did what they could to shed a little light on the situation. But day or night, around these parts, the enemy can be difficult to spot. III.

The next day, I was inside a LAV heading to Sangisar. The convoy crept along. "I'd rather arrive two hours late and keep both my legs," said a LAV gunner. Roadside bombs have killed most of the 74 Canadian soldiers slain in Afghanistan to date, injuring hundreds of others, some of them along this very route.

Sitting atop the LAV, one can see the landscape is barren and flat, ringed by mountains. Mud compounds interrupt the flatlands. Roadside piles of rocks mark the graves of the dead Afghans. There are some very small piles.

Close to the cemeteries, children beg soldiers for food and toys. Some also make the sign of writing on their hands with imaginary pens and pencils – for the probable reason that they are imaginary to these kids. There are no schools to speak of.

To help win hearts and minds, the soldiers brought dolls to hand out en route to the destination: Plush pink bunnies, polar bears bundled up in scarves, toys seemed out of place in Afghanistan. The children scurried and fought for the gifts. Through interpreters, Canadian Forces soldiers asked the parents where the Taliban might be.

When the convoy finally arrived at a rickety Afghan National Army outpost, the Canadians made camp where ragtag ANA soldiers live off tea, rice and bread. Western concepts of fitness, at least, have made some inroads here. A makeshift gym consisted of sandbags tied to broomsticks. Coils of wire on ends of a metal pole served as a bench press barbell.

"Three, no good," an ANA soldier told me in English after I managed only a few repetitions. "Ten, good."

The role of the Canadian soldiers at the outpost is to mentor the fledgling army, until the Afghans can stand on their own.

A burly ANA Sergeant, Imran Sadiq, said through an interpreter says he appreciated the help – including the flares from the Canadian gunners used to light up the sky the night before. Even if the Taliban remained unseen in the distance.

"We need the help, but if the Canadians are not here, we can control it," he said. But he added that the ANA first needs new uniforms for his men, new guns, better ammo, more pay, and armoured vehicles.

Saying he hated Americans and resented their presence in Afghanistan, Sgt. Sadiq nevertheless insisted the Canadians were good allies. He said he wanted them to stay. But if they had to pull out, he said, he'd very much appreciate it if they could leave their hardware. "If the Canadians leave their tanks and LAVs behind to us we would control all of Afghanistan!" Sgt. Sadiq said, with a smile. But for now, his ambitions are confined to what he can accomplish with pickup trucks.

A Kandahari translator with the army (who, like all English translators is paid twice to four times as much as the ANA soldiers) said he also appreciated the Canadian presence. "If they stay here for 20 years I will stay with them for 20 years," he said.

The Canadian soldiers slept in tents and under stars as the temperatures neared zero. As night fell, a soldier relayed a news report to the troops tucked into sleeping bags: 16 Afghan police had been captured and presumed killed in Kandahar by the Taliban. Compared to soldiers, police are soft targets. A news wire service would soon report more than 850 Afghan Police have been killed in 2007. For me, at least, this was something fearful to contemplate ahead of the march into Taliban territory.

IV.

There are other horrors. It's the barefoot, shivering toddlers that emerge from the mud houses, who seem to linger the most in the minds of Canadian soldiers.. The Vandoos, mostly Quebecers well acquainted with winter, are not averse to griping about the way the temperature in the desert falls at night. But many are amazed at the resilience of the destitute children. Some soldiers said that, on past missions, they gave the children their military-issue blankets.

The joint Canadian-ANA foot patrol began at dawn on the morning of Dec. 30, a plod through Sangisar and surrounding villages. The radius was only a kilometre or so from the ANA outpost, but it's important and treacherous ground.

Buildings are made of a lot of mud and a little wood. The grape vineyards are corrugated mounds of earth where now-barren vines are set to spread out in the spring. Grapes are not the only crop; the air smells of drying marijuana plants, which are stacked everywhere. A small military aircraft buzzed in the air above.

The enemy was nowhere to be seen. Even villagers were scarce, at least initially. Some eventually came out to talk to the infantry. A wizened farmer named Momideen said he was a 35-year-old father of six. None of his offspring can read, he said. The country had been at war as long as he could remember.

Perched squatting on a stoop, the farmer said his family is one of only eight who remain in the village. Twenty other families have fled the fighting, he said, since the ANA outpost was built.

"We cannot work. Taliban comes here and makes fight. Sometimes you guys too, on patrolling mission, then we have some problems," he said through an interpreter. "We want to go away from ANA. The Taliban now keep coming here, making ambushes. ... When they [the ANA] go, the Taliban comes."

"We are poor," he said, explaining that the goats and ox the families slaughtered for recent Eid celebrations were a luxury. "We cannot leave here."

There are no schools, no hospitals. There is a mosque. "There is no difference between the Taliban and this government," Momideen said. "If any government helps us we follow that government."

"We need security. We need schools. We want to take our refugees back. We want to fill our village full of security."

Asked what he hoped for his children's future, he said that "I want them to follow our religion, Islam. Our children must learn the Koran."

"Then they can go to school and learn other books."

V.

The daylong operation yielded some weapons caches, no casualties, and a few pleasant surprises.

The Canadian Forces soldiers were surprised at their ANA colleagues' ability to find Taliban caches, stashes of bullets and the like. But some remained critical of the ANA's trigger happy tendencies – the Afghans fired their guns at times, but hitting nobody and nothing.

The Taliban seemed to have made the choice to flee the area rather than stay and fight. But to determine this, it took the patrols all day to do the sweeps. The Canadians had just enough time to head back to the base for nightfall.

Once the convoy turned around from Sangisar, the voice on the intercom inside the LAV warned the vehicles had to be wary of IEDs. Even so, the voice said it was imperative to be back on the base by night.

Often, the soldiers thoughts seemed to turn to Gunner Dion, slain on the highway by an unseen bomb, as the forces in the field did their utmost to look the Taliban in the eye.

To everyone's relief, the soldiers got home safely from Sangisar, just as dusk fell on Afghanistan.

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