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MEDIA SUMMARY REPORT

Firefight in Sangin: The Death of Pte. Robert Costall

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Background

Operation ARCHER, Canada's contribution to the international campaign against terrorism, is carried out by Task Force Afghanistan (TFA), an organization of approximately 2,300 combat arms and support troops. Part of TFA is a Battle Group, known as Task Force Orion (TF Orion), of about 1,000 members located in and around Kandahar. In March 2006, TF Orion was primarily built around 1st Battalion Princess Patricia's Canadian Light Infantry (1 PPCLI) from Edmonton, and includes engineering, artillery, and armoured reconnaissance support, as well as a Provincial Reconstruction Team (PRT) and an unmanned aerial vehicle (UAV) unit. TF Orion is based at Kandahar airfield, but conducts operations throughout the area.

TF Orion is part of a larger organization, Combined Task Force (CTF) Aegis, a multinational effort led in March 2006 by Canadian Brigadier General David Fraser, with Canada in charge of Kandahar, the United Kingdom as lead in Helmand, the Netherlands controlling Oruzgan and the Americans maintaining Zabol. CTF Aegis is listed as a "subordinate unit" to Combined Joint Task Force-76 (CJTF-76), whose mission is, "to conduct a full spectrum of operations throughout its operations area to defeat enemy extremist movement, establish an enduring security and reshape its posture for the Long War in order to set conditions for long-term stability in Afghanistan." CJTF-76, a subordinate unit to Combined Forces Command-Afghanistan, was commanded by U.S. Army Major General Benjamin Freakley in March 2006.

Immediately west of Kandahar is Helmand province, one of 34 in Afghanistan, located at the south-west corner of the country. Helmand shares a border with Pakistan in the south. It has a population of more than 1,000,000 (largely of Pashtun ethnicity), and covers approximately 59,600 square kilometres, making it somewhat larger than Nova Scotia. The Helmand River flows through the mainly desert region, providing irrigation to the plains in the area.

Helmand is considered to be in "a dominant position" in Afghanistan as an opium producer, accounting for around 25 percent of the national opium poppy cultivated area in recent years. Within the province, Sangin District has been described as a major poppy growing area. It reportedly features a number of factors that can contribute to instability and insurgency: no local police or military presence, a number of roads converging in the area, three different tribal groups living in close proximity. Some of the illegal drug activity is reportedly financing the insurgents.

Fire Base Robinson

In mid-February 2006, an Afghanistan National Army (ANA) Forward Operating Base (FOB) was reportedly set up near the village of Heydarabad (referred to as "Heder Abad" in one media report from an embedded Canadian reporter). The FOB was reportedly named "FOB Robinson" in memory of an American soldier killed in the area. A statement by the U.S. Department of Defense said, "Staff Sergeant Christopher L. Robinson, 36, Brandon, Miss., died in Sangin District, Afghanistan on March 25, when his vehicle came under enemy small arms fire during combat operations. Robinson

was assigned to the Army National Guard's 2nd Battalion, 20th Special Forces Group, Jackson, Mississippi.”

FOB Robinson is described as being a small outpost, mostly made up of defensive works, tents and razor wire. One description: “it is marked off only by an internal “fence” of sandbags and an external one, perhaps 30 feet beyond, of concertina wire ... It sits surrounded by known enemy — three local Taliban commanders are known by name to coalition forces — on three of four sides, with a half-dozen tiny nearby villages, more affluent than is usual in this impoverished nation, of suspect loyalties.”

The FOB reportedly contained to 100 troops - mostly of ANA soldiers, with some (one media report mentions “a handful”) U.S. military training staff. One media report mentions a US Special Forces presence at the FOB as well. British military officials are quoted in early reports saying the FOB had periodically come under “probing mortar attacks” over the past five or six weeks. Later media reports describe the FOB as having come under some form of attack on 25 of the previous 40 days. Afghanistan National Police officials working in Sangin have been quoted by media saying Taliban attacks have intensified since the U.S. transferred control of operations in Helmand to British forces. One police officer told reporters, “The Taliban has threatened the government, saying they have 600 suicide bombers waiting for the British troops and government officials.”

The Ambush

On March 28, 2006, an Afghanistan National Army (ANA) convoy was bringing supplies from a village in the area to a remote FOB in Sangin District. At approximately 1500 local (1030 UTC), the ANA convoy came under small arms and rocket propelled grenade (RPG) fire approximately eight kilometres from the FOB (although one media account from a reporter in Kandahar indicates it was 13 kilometres from the FOB). Media reports indicate a remote controlled improvised explosive device (IED) was detonated, cratering the road and isolating the convoy. Eight ANA troops were reportedly killed in the ambush.

As troops from FOB Robinson were preparing to assist the stranded convoy, insurgents attacked the FOB on three sides with mortar, machine gun and rocket propelled grenades. In response to the attack, Coalition commanders authorized air strikes in support of the FOB. Media reports indicate two British Harriers, two American Apache gunships were dispatched, as well as bombing raids by B-52 heavy bombers. One media report says the air support was “supplementing direct-fire weapons and mortar volleys.”

Quick Response Force, Under Fire

According to www.timeanddate.com, the sun set in Kabul (<http://tinyurl.com/gwun5>) on March 28 at approximately 1810 local (1340 Z).

When air strikes proved ineffective, at approximately 2200 local (1730 Z), a Quick Response Force (QRF) based at Kandahar Airfield was tasked with reinforcing the

FOB. At that point, 7 Platoon, C Company, 1 PPCLI was the unit ready to respond to such calls for help. The platoon's 38 troops, following a one hour flight, were inserted into the FOB, arriving at approximately 2300 local (1830Z).

According to one media report, Sergeant First Class John Thomas Stone, 52, was already dead when the QRF arrived at the FOB. SFC Stone was a National Guard medic from Vermont, assigned to the U.S. Army National Guard's 15th Civil Support Team. A U.S. Department of Defense statement issued March 30 indicated that SFC Stone was killed, "as a result of enemy mortar and small arms attacks during combat operations hostile small arms and mortar fire." Other media reports indicate that Stone may have been killed while treating Costall's injuries.

At approximately 0130 local (2100Z) on March 29, 2006, the insurgents launched a major attack on the FOB. Media reports indicate the insurgents were firing into the FOB from nearby hills "from multiple directions" with small arms and rocket propelled grenades. Speaking after the firefight, the OC C Company is quoted saying, "They'd come under a fairly heavy rain of fire from what appeared to be a coordinated attack involving mortars, RPGs, which are shoulder launched grenades, machine guns and small arms fire."

One detailed account described how the Taliban attacked the FOB: "Some crossed the looping Helmand River on small craft and approached across a series of desert bumps; others emerged from a sculpted promontory to the west — which has since been bulldozed; a third wave scrambled from a clot of ruins towards the northern perimeter of the base..."

A news release issued by CENTCOM following the battle said, "(Afghan Army) and Coalition ground forces engaged an estimated 20 enemy with small-arms fire. In addition, close-air support aircraft delivered 11 Joint Direct Attack Munitions on enemy positions."

During the firefight, Pte. Costall was reportedly manning a C-9 Light Machine Gun (5.56mm) during the firefight. One media account indicated that Costall may have been shot in the head while moving with a group to reinforce one corner of the FOB "outside the protection of the main area, another account described shots to the head and chest and yet another mentioned a shot in the back of the head and in the side.

A media account based on interviews with troops involved in the firefight said, "Costall and other members of his (section) were ordered to take positions outside the relative safety of the base's inner sandbagged walls, to defend a vulnerable corner of the outer base. They moved through a makeshift gate, crossing an open, sandy area to a sheltered spot behind a wall of American (HESCO) barriers – giant, sand-filled wire baskets which form a perimeter on one side of the base. There on the open sand, as they made their way to the barrier wall, Costall was reportedly hit and killed and three of his comrades were wounded. The opening through which they passed, from the inner sandbags to the outer perimeter, has been named 'Costall's gate.' "

Another media report quoted an unidentified military official saying, "They may have moved in between two sections firing at each other ... I'm not sure they were mistaken for Taliban as much as they might have gotten caught up in somebody's arc of fire or somebody was shootin' over their head."

Later media reports, quoting un-named sources and Afghan National Police officials from Sangin, indicate the shots that killed Costall came from Taliban forces.

The most recent media reports (May 2007) reported, "Costall was laying down fire in a narrow band between the inside sand berm and the outer razor wire when he was felled. An autopsy in Toronto determined he'd been hit twice – once through the chest and once in the back of the head. But because there were no bullet fragments recovered, ballistic testing was unable to identify whether Costall had been shot by weapons issued to Canadian, American or Afghan troops, or the Kalashnikovs typically used by Taliban fighters."

Three Canadians, one American and one ANA soldier were injured in the firefight. The three Canadians injured in the attack were described as having non-life threatening flesh wounds from gunshots.

A Canadian Forces statement said the dead and wounded were evacuated by Black Hawk helicopter to the hospital at Kandahar airfield. Later the same day, the three Canadians injured in the battle attended the ceremony for the repatriation of Pte. Costall to Canada, one sitting in a wheelchair with bandaged lower legs, one on crutches, and the other with a plastic leg cast.

Coalition forces were reportedly caught off guard by the intensity of the attack. British Colonel Chris Vernon, chief of staff for Combined Task Force Aegis, told reporters at a March 29 briefing in Kandahar, "The Taliban generally operate in small groups of eight to 10, and they will generally avoid confrontation against larger numbers ... The size and tenacity may have slightly exceeded our estimates." Other media quoted different military sources describing the exchange of fire, which reportedly lasted several hours, as a "pretty fierce firefight" and "a sustained assault." One reporter is quoted calling the firefight, "the biggest battle in Afghanistan for two months."

Follow-up

A Combined Forces Command-Afghanistan statement issued April 4 said, "In the course of their pursuit, Coalition forces destroyed two Taliban headquarters buildings and overran a Taliban compound. The Coalition forces discovered and destroyed large caches of munitions, including weapons and materials for making improvised explosive devices." One media account described the destruction of more than 450 kilograms of ammonia nitrate, a fertilizer used as an explosive in IED's.

Early media accounts indicated that by sunrise on March 29 (0545 local, 0115 Z), military sources reported to media that "all was quiet" at the FOB, and that battle damage assessment was under way. At approximately 0600 local (0130 Z) on March

29 (the day after his 34th birthday), OC C Company, Major Bill Fletcher told reporters he told the rest of C Company about the death and injuries at the FOB battle. Later media accounts indicated the firefight continued until noon local (0730Z) on March 29, with one Canadian commander quoted saying the firefight “raged all day, through the night and right through the morning of the 29th.”

Media reports quoting various military sources and statements indicated that between 32 and 34 enemy were killed, mostly by close air support. One media report quotes the OC C Company saying that there were approximately 70 enemy casualties. One of the reasons for the difficulty in estimating Taliban dead is that, in the words of OC C Company, “as part of the honour amongst warriors,” coalition forces allow the Taliban to retrieve their fallen and wounded “so long as they're not shooting at us” when they do it.”

At the March 29 briefing at Kandahar, Col. Vernon was asked about Afghan media reports that there had been civilian casualties and damage to civilian homes in the area. His response: “I find that very unlikely. I've seen the aerial photographs around the (FOB). It's in the middle of nowhere. The attacks came over open ground. I cannot see in any way how any degree of civilian damage could have been inflicted because there isn't any civilian habitation around. It's almost in the middle of nowhere.”

An Afghan National Police official told reporters later that, “civilians outside the forward operating base were killed when B-52s were called in to bomb a nearby compound into which Taliban fighters had fled.”

On April 2, Operation Ketara (Pashtun for “dagger”) was launched. Although TF Aegis is a subordinate unit to CJTF-76, with an American commander, one media report indicated that the operation was “under British oversight,” perhaps because the Helmand area is under nominal British command.

The remainder of C Company 1 PPCLI conducted an approximately 24 hour road move, supported by elements of the Royal Canadian Horse Artillery, reconnaissance units and American air support. The convoy reportedly arrived at FOB Robinson at approximately 0700 local (0230Z) on April 3, to further reinforce the FOB. The OC of C Company is quoted telling officers and reporters that the aims of OP Ketara were to:

- Reinforce FOB Robinson until relieved by British troops;
- Be prepared to provide support to a nearby Provincial Reconstruction Team manned by U.S. forces in Lashkar Gah (the provincial capital of Helmand);
- Disrupt Taliban Forces in the area, denying them access to the transport corridor in the area;
- Create “settled conditions” as a prelude to British and U.S. forces beginning opium poppy eradication efforts; and
- “Support “the kill-capture” mission of special forces in the area.”

The enemy situation, as outlined in the pre-mission briefing, appears to be as follows:

- An estimated 150 Taliban hard core remain in the area, with three

identified leaders, likely reinforced by poppy farmers and warlords in the area;

- “Remnants of the repressive Islamic fundamentalist Taliban, who ruled most of this embattled country until the U.S. invasion in the fall of 2001, still enjoy some local support”;
- An estimated half-dozen suicide bombers in cars, searching the Kandahar area for the Op Ketara convoy;
- The insurgents in the area have been able to quickly activate pre-planted improvised explosive devices (IEDs); and
- “They are sophisticated and disciplined enough to maintain both radio silence and a fighting reserve.”

During C Company’s road move, one of the LAV’s in the convoy had its main armament hit by a vehicle, causing the turret to swing around and injure two soldiers on air sentry seriously enough to be evacuated by helicopter. The injuries were reportedly not life threatening.

C Company’s 7 Platoon had been moved back to Kandahar airfield shortly before or shortly after the convoy entered FOB Robinson. While C Company is reportedly to be in place longer than 7 Platoon was, no timeframe has been given in media reports. After briefly visiting the area, Brig. Gen. Fraser ordered reporters out of FOB Robinson because of the security situation in the area.

Friendly Fire?

Immediately following the firefight, a CF statement issued April 4 said, “a preliminary investigation was conducted by the Canadian Forces National Investigation Service (CFNIS) and the U.S. military ... the initial findings justify the requirement for further investigation to determine the facts and circumstances surrounding the firefight, including whether any of the casualties may have resulted from “friendly fire... As a consequence, a full CFNIS investigation has been initiated. Separately, but in cooperation with CFNIS, the U.S. military is also investigating.” Later media reports indicated Afghan authorities also conducted their own probe.

Then-Commander of Combined Forces Command-Afghanistan, U.S. Lt. Gen. Karl Eikenberry, reportedly determined that an investigation was needed following an initial review of the facts. A media report indicated that, “forensic evidence was uncovered by the military police investigation that suggested Costall's death could have come from friendly fire. Maj. Bud Garroch, the (CFNIS’s) senior operating officer, (said) his four-man team of military police working out of Kandahar have “cause for concern” due to evidence they've gathered and from initial interviews with soldiers.” One media account indicated that Brig. Gen. Fraser was told by injured troops he visited in hospital that they may have been, “shot by our own side.”

The Commander of CJTF-76 formed a U.S., Canadian and Afghan investigation team whose members will work separately, but in co-operation with each other, to produce three separate “national investigational reports.” Some media reports indicate the

investigation could take “weeks or months,” although one report quotes a Canadian “military official” saying it could take approximately two weeks, if not a little longer. A more detailed report quoting a CFNIS source said four military police officers had been sent to Kandahar to assist in the investigation, which he said would be “wrapped up in weeks,” after which the CF is expected to conduct a board of inquiry into the incident.

The CF statement described how complicated the situation was: “Coalition military operations in Afghanistan are complex. Terrain, weather and threat levels combine to create an extremely challenging operating environment. The fact that this incident occurred at night, with attacks from multiple directions, just adds to the complexity.” Brig. Gen. Fraser is quoted in several accounts ruling out friendly casualties from the air strike.

According to media reports published in May 2007, the five-person Canadian Board of Inquiry (BOI) finished its investigation in July 2006, and submitted a report to Canadian Expeditionary Forces Command. Chief of Defence Staff General Rick Hillier is said to have had a copy of the report since the summer of 2006. Media reports indicate that the report will not be released until vetted by American and Afghan military officials, who reportedly have the right to designate any of the contents classified.

General Hillier is quoted saying he is frustrated by how long it is taking for the reports to be made public, telling reporters on or around May 3, 2007 that “within the next month, we’ll be ready to go completely public and say here’s what we found in that (BOI).”

An Associated Press report on July 2, 2007 indicated that a U.S. Army report obtained by the wire service showed says friendly fire was responsible for the death of Pte. Costall and Sgt. Stone. The report, called a “collection of witness statements assembled by U.S. investigators”, allegedly indicated that a gunner opened fire at two allied positions in quick succession on March 29, 2006. The report allegedly indicated Sgt. Stone “was shot once in the back and once in the head while he and allied soldiers were repelling a major, night-time attack”.

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