

Operation Rolling Thunder ends successfully

KATHERINE O'NEILL
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PASHMUL, AFGHANISTAN — Even by Afghanistan standards, Major Stacy Grubb has had a very long week.

On Sunday, the commanding officer of a Shilo, Man.-based battle group company wound up in the hospital after his vehicle was hit by a suicide bomber. By Friday, he had finished leading a top-secret military operation that saw Canadian soldiers engaged in the heaviest fighting so far this year against Taliban militants.

“I started the operation on a hospital operating table and I'm ending it with everybody coming back safely. I couldn't be happier,” Major Grubb said Friday. He leads the 2nd Battalion Princess Patricia's Canadian Light Infantry (2PPCLI), Charles Company.

Code-named Operation Rawa Tander, Pashto for Rolling Thunder, the joint Canada and Afghan military mission was aimed at disrupting insurgent activity in one of Kandahar province's most dangerous areas, Pashmul.



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The swollen green poppy bulbs are being plucked from the fields as the annual spring harvest is underway in Afghanistan's volatile and dangerous Panjwayi District. (*Katherine O'Neill/The Globe and Mail*)

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Located in Zhari district, the birthplace of the Taliban movement, the area is a hornet's nest of insurgent activity. The battle-scarred region, southwest of Kandahar, has been the site of several, often bloody, battles for Canadian soldiers since 2006.

The operation, which involved multiple platoons, started before day-break on Tuesday and, by 6:15 a.m., bullets were already ripping through Pashmul, a collection of small, ancient villages and farmland. The few locals still living in the area either fled by foot or hunkered down in their compounds before the fighting started. Most are poor farmers.

Canadian and Afghan soldiers were able to sneak up on a suspect compound and take the militants by surprise. The insurgents, toting AK-47s and rocket-propelled grenade launchers, returned fire for about half an hour from a grape hut.

The battle ended a short time later after the Canadians called on U.S. military air support to drop several bombs, including Hellfire missiles, on the area.

As the week progressed, the fighting intensified, with Friday being the most hard-fought for Canadian and Afghan forces.

About 8 a.m. Friday, a large number of insurgents began shooting at the soldiers from several positions. The terrain, which was mainly lush grape fields and small groves of dense trees, made it difficult at first to tell exactly where the militants were hiding.

For about two hours, the two sides exchanged fire, with the Canadian and Afghan forces calling in air and artillery support. More than 30 rounds of artillery fire whistled through the hot, spring morning air and hit mud grape huts and compounds where the insurgents were positioned.

By 11 a.m., the shooting had largely stopped. A short time later, Afghan National Army soldiers followed a trail of blood into one compound. Four insurgents were inside; only one was alive. He was later detained.

During the lengthy operation, several insurgents were killed or injured. Only one Afghan soldier was hurt; he accidentally shot himself in the foot. No Canadians were injured.

Major Grubb acknowledged the operation isn't a "permanent result" because the Taliban seem to have an unlimited supply of fighters willing to battle for Pashmul. However, he quickly added that, in the short-term, it "really hurt" their activities in the area and showed ISAF has the ability to "project power anywhere, any time."

Soldiers who have fought in this turbulent spot before have already noticed small but important security improvements.

"ISAF and the ANA have a better grip on this area now. When I was here the first time, we wouldn't have been able to walk around like we have," said Sergeant Pete Dunwoody, with 2PPCLI Charlie Company, 7 Platoon. He also pointed out there are now more people living in the area than there were during his first Afghanistan tour in 2006.

Sgt. Dunwoody said the Afghan military, which is being mentored by NATO forces, including Canada, has also improved dramatically since 2006. "They are 10 times better. It's good to see. It makes our job easier."

For many Canadian soldiers, the operation was the first time they've been engaged in combat during this tour, which for most started in February. Up until this week, the Taliban had avoided lengthy gun battles and largely staged one-off attacks, including suicide bombs and roadside bombs.

Kandahar's provincial police chief General Syed Aqa Saqib held a news conference on Saturday morning to announce that at least 16 Taliban insurgents were killed during the joint Canadian-Afghan military operation, including Mullah Tohr Agha. He was a group commander for the militant group in the Zhari district.

Mr. Saqib said many Taliban fighters wounded, but he didn't know the exact number.

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