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In the line of fire

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ILLUSTRATION:	Photo: The Hamilton Spectator / Mark Graham; Photo: Department of National Defence / Private Mark Graham, right, was killed around dawn last Labour Day by a U.S. air force fighter plane, an A−10A Thunderbolt, nicknamed the Warthog. Graham's task was to drive a light−armoured vehicle, or LAV−3. As he made an entry in his diary while awaiting orders in his LAV, the Taliban attacked without warning. ; Photo: Toronto Star File Photo / Corporal Chad Linden, left, and Master Corporal Allan Johnson were with Charlie Company of the Royal Canadian Regiment a year ago at Ma'Sum Ghar, Afghanistan, where a battle with the Taliban left dozens of Canadians injured and five dead, including Private Mark Graham of Hamilton. ; Photo: Spectator File Photos / Private Mark Graham was killed around dawn last Labour Day by a U.S. air force fighter plane, an A−10A Thunderbolt, nicknamed the Warthog. ; Photo: Graham's task was to drive a light−armoured vehicle, or LAV−3. As he made an entry in his diary while awaiting orders in his LAV, the Taliban attacked without warning. ; Photo: Private Mark Graham ;
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Three seconds.

Actually, 3.3 seconds, to be precise.

That's just about the same amount of time it takes to read this sentence.

Still, with the unimaginable fury that's been built into today's military weaponry, that's enough time for a fighter plane's machine−gun to spit out 211 rounds of high−explosive, armour−piercing ammunition − brutal, nasty stuff designed specifically to fragment and then rip apart whatever it touches.

On the manufacturer's website, there are pictures of the ammo slicing through layers of inch−thick metal plates lined in a row. Sometimes, the deadly

17−centimetre−long bullet contains uranium, heavier than the usual tungsten alloy, just to give it a little added kick.

Three seconds. That's all.

Tick. Tick. Tick.

So many lives affected because of a tragic mistake that lasted three short seconds just before dawn on Sept. 4, 2006.

One bloody weekend Part 1

Canadians who lived through the carnage tell the tale of two deadly days at Ma'Sum Ghar

Steve Buist

The dozens of Canadian soldiers left dazed and bleeding in the faint, gathering light before the sun cracked the horizon. Their families in Canada who'd soon learn the news by telephone.

The American pilot, never publicly identified, who ignored the information on his cockpit display and now carries the weight of that fateful mistake with him each day.

And one dead Canadian soldier, a 33−year−old former Olympic track star from Hamilton's west Mountain named Mark Graham, killed not by the enemy but by his allies.

Tuesday marks the first anniversary of the friendly fire incident in southern Afghanistan that killed Graham and wounded 35 other Canadian soldiers.

A long−awaited report released by the Canadian government recently concluded the American fighter pilot was solely responsible for Graham's death and the other injuries because he neglected to confirm his cockpit display, which showed he was strafing the wrong target.

The friendly fire incident was the final, bitter insult of a bloody Labour Day weekend in southern Afghanistan for the Royal Canadian Regiment's Charlie Company.

A day earlier, four members of Charlie Company were killed and another six were injured when they were ambushed in a field by the Taliban.

In less than 24 hours, C Company's 8 Platoon had been horribly shredded. When the dust cleared Labour Day morning, only eight of the platoon's 37 soldiers were left unscathed.

This is the story of that deadly weekend in Afghanistan, told from the ground and from the air, from those who witnessed the carnage firsthand. Some are telling their stories for the first time.

The soldiers of RCR's Charlie Company left CFB Petawawa and began arriving at Kandahar Airfield during the first week of August 2006.

"The heat, the smell," said Captain Jeremy Hiltz, recalling his first thoughts when he reached the main Canadian base in Afghanistan.

"Bullets constantly going off because there's always people shooting on ranges and stuff, helicopters and jets coming and going."

Just 25 at the time, Hiltz was commanding officer of Charlie Company's 8 Platoon, Graham's assigned unit.

Charlie Company's mission was to help lead Operation Medusa, named for the Greek mythological being who had snakes for her hair and a gaze that could turn others to stone.

Operation Medusa was a NATO coalition offensive centred on the Panjwaii district of southern Afghanistan, about 30 kilometres southwest of Kandahar.

The objective was to secure the Taliban−controlled Highway 1, the area's major transportation route.

Even a cursory glance at a history book suggests it would be a difficult mission.

With its mountainous passes and its location in the heart of central Asia, Afghanistan was described by one historian as the "roundabout of the ancient world."

It's a country woven together over time from many rival tribes and languages, notoriously difficult to rule, but even more difficult to conquer for those through history who have been brave enough –– or perhaps foolish enough –– to invade. The British learned that lesson twice in the 19th century. The Soviet army would discover the same after suffering heavy losses over 10 years following their 1979 invasion.

Canada's decision to send ground troops to Afghanistan shortly after the Sept. 11, 2001, terrorist attacks has come under increasingly harsh scrutiny here at home.

The casualties continue to mount –– 70 Canadian soldiers dead, to date. And there's growing criticism that no end to the war is in sight while Canada's reason for being there has become blurry.

That rankles the soldiers on the ground.

Major Matthew Sprague of Kenora was Charlie Company's commanding officer during the launch of Operation Medusa.

Sprague is stationed in Kingston now, but he'd go back to Afghanistan in a second because he's proud of what Canadian forces have helped accomplish there.

"When we first got there (Panjwaii district) at the start of September, there was maybe 100 people living there because they were too poor to leave or had nowhere to go," said Sprague.

"By the time we left in February, there were 15,000 people who lived in the area, because we'd gone in and made it secure for them.

"They're not sexy stories, so nobody picks up on them, but for all intents and purposes that's the reason we're there."

Mark Graham was also aware of the role that Canadians were playing in lives of Afghans.

In his phone calls home, he would tell his parents, Albert and Linda, about how it affected him to see the living conditions faced by young girls who were the same age as his eight–year–old daughter, Shae–Lynn.

"Mark was clear that he was there for democracy," said Linda Graham. "He knew why he was there.

"He knew it was about democracy and making a safer world."

"In the long run, all that matters to me are my set of values and morals. I believe that those of my leaders and country still remain congruent with mine. These people need help. We, who are the fortunate, must extend a hand to help so as to provide a stable environment for thousands of children to grow and contribute to the final globalization of our planet and destroy those who would oppose such vision and desire with threats of terror.

"Our planet sits on the edge of destruction and only through unity will my daughter and her children have a future of peace and prosperity."

–– From Mark Graham's diary, May 2006

The start of Operation Medusa was to focus on the village of Pashmul, located on the north side of the Arghandab River, 30 kilometres southwest of the Canadian base in Kandahar.

In the three weeks leading up to the operation's launch, Charlie Company was out in the field, carrying out small missions but not yet engaged in "contact" –– the army's sanitized word for direct combat with the enemy.

"We spent very little time at Kandahar Airfield –– as little time as humanly possible, because that place sucks," said Sprague, who preferred to be out in the field.

"Once you left Kandahar, it was your terms," he explained. "You got to dictate the pace of things, what was going to happen, when it was going to happen."

But it also meant leaving behind even the most basic personal comforts.

The life of a Canadian soldier in Afghanistan certainly isn't glamorous.

Most of the time, Charlie Company was sleeping on the ground under the stars. One night, they slept in an onion patch.

If it rained, the soldiers would sleep on the ground beside their vehicles, which were equipped with tarps that could be pulled out for a tiny bit of protection.

"It was just something to have over our heads," said Chad Kinden, a member of Charlie Company's 7 Platoon who's now back home in Lewisporte, N.L.

Once in a while, Charlie Company would hole up in an abandoned building. Another time, they slept in a bunker system that they built.

"In December and January, it got really cold at night, so a couple of us found some stoves that were lying around and used them in our bunkers," said Kinden.D12

By the start of September, Charlie Company was moving into position on the south side of the Arghandab River for the beginning of Operation Medusa.

Prior to the launch of the offensive, coalition planes dropped leaflets in the Pashmul area, warning civilians to leave before the attack began.

"Basically: 'Get out. If you stay in, then you're the enemy,'" said Kinden.

"The only people that were left were the Taliban," Sprague added. "From our perspective, that makes things very easy because then you know who the bad guys are."

But the leaflet drop may have also set up the Canadian troops to be ambushed by the Taliban.

"They're not stupid, they can put two and two together," said Hiltz, adding that it's a fine line to navigate for the coalition forces.

"Optics are sometimes more important than tactics. If you don't give any warning and then you end up killing a bunch of civilians, which you don't want to do, it sometimes is more detrimental to us than any of the tactical achievements we've gained."

Mark Graham was born May 17, 1973, in Gordon Town, Jamaica, and came to Hamilton when he was a young boy.

He attended Chedoke Middle School, then Sir Allan MacNab Secondary School, where he excelled at track and basketball.

At 6−foot−4, with a chiselled frame of 200 pounds, Graham was an imposing, one−in−a−million physical specimen who was as gentle as a big puppy.

He specialized in the 400 metres and was named to Canada's 4x400m relay team for the 1992 Summer Olympics in Barcelona. He also represented Canada in the 400 metres at the 1994 Commonwealth Games in Victoria.

In 1993, he earned a full track scholarship to the University of Nebraska, where he spent two seasons before transferring to Kent State University in Ohio.

Mike Caza, Graham's roommate for two years at Kent State, remembers the sprinter for his sense of humour.

"He was just a character," said Caza, who now runs an athlete training centre in suburban Cleveland. "He always had a smile on his face.

"He was always the guy who stuck out in a crowd, not just because of his physical stature but his personality, too."

Caza was a high jumper from Chatham who transferred to Kent State from Louisiana State University the same year Graham arrived from Nebraska. The two Canadian kids, both transfer students, were a natural fit to be roommates.

"There's not too many guys in the world with his build. Unbelievable genetics. And he had the athleticism to go with it.

"He was definitely a machine," said Caza. "He was obviously a very good athlete but never cocky or arrogant."

But by 1996, injuries cut short his athletic career and he was unable to qualify again for the Olympics.

For several years, Graham worked as a fitness instructor while also helping coach track and field at MacNab. In 2004, he decided to join the army, in part because he wanted the structure that military life could provide.

Basic training took him from St. Jean−sur−Richelieu in Quebec to Meaford and then eventually to CFB Petawawa, where 1st Battalion, Royal Canadian Regiment is based.

Graham's role in 8 Platoon, C Company, was to drive a LAV−3, one of the eight−wheeled, light−armoured vehicles that Canadian troops use in combat.

"He's one of the nicest guys you'd ever meet," said Kinden, who was a LAV gunner at the time.

"The ladies liked him," he added with a chuckle. "Just go to the bar and he'd be the centre of attention."

Graham arrived in Kandahar in the first week of August with Charlie Company.

"Some days, Mark called me twice," said his father, Albert. "Some of the conversations, he said things, and

my answer was 'Aww, nothing will happen, let's not talk about that.'

"And he said: 'You never know, Dad, you better say some of these things. If anything ever happened, I'd like to be buried in the capital.' And I said, 'Yeah, yeah, right, when you're old and grey.'"

Albert Graham last spoke with his son on Friday, Sept. 1, the day before Operation Medusa's ground offensive began. Mark was scared.

"I don't share a lot of our last conversation with a lot of people. I will just say he knew what could have happened."

Saturday, Sept. 2

By Saturday morning, Charlie Company, the other supporting coalition forces and a limited number of Afghan National Army soldiers had rolled into position along the hillside south of the Arghandab River, facing the village of Pashmul.

The troops were stationed at a place called Ma'Sum Ghar –– Ma'Sum is a person's name, and Ghar means a mountainside cave in the country's Pashto language.

Just below Ma'Sum Ghar were the distinctive walled grape fields of the district, set out roughly in 100–metre–square plots.

Inside the squares, there were rows of wide–based mud walls that stood chest high, with the grape vines planted firmly across the tops of the walls. Over time, the vines and roots held the walls together almost like the reinforcing steel bars inside concrete.

The grape field walls were one of the first obstacles that would have to be overcome before the assault could begin.

"They've been there for 50 years, they're hard as rock," said Sprague. "You can't drive through them, you can't jump over them because you've got the vines growing along the top."

The first step was to bulldoze a path through them so the troops would eventually be able to reach the riverbed.

From the troops' line on the hillside at Ma'Sum Ghar, it was about 400 metres down to the edge of the sprawling bed of the Arghandab River, which was almost a kilometre wide.

But the Arghandab was a river in name only. There was almost no water running through the bed, and what water there was in a couple of places could be easily crossed on foot.

On the north side of the riverbed were farmers' fields and the village of Pashmul.

"Because it's a riverbed, it's pretty much the only greenbelt, so it's the most densely populated areas over there," said Kinden. "When you get on the other side of the river, it's trees, plants, farms, you name it."

And huge fields of marijuana plants growing as tall as trees.

"Afghanistan's full of warlords and what I'd heard was that the warlords would pay the farmers to grow these crops and no one really bothered them," Kinden said. "You'd see big marijuana plants in people's front gardens. It's a different world."

By the time Operation Medusa began, Hiltz said, the plants were at least 10 feet tall.D12

From the far side of the river bed, it was about 400 metres through the fields to the first objective of Operation Medusa −− the White Schoolhouse, a heavily fortified compound that was known to be held by the Taliban.

The Canadians would learn later −− too late, as it turned out −− that the compound was nearly impenetrable, and connected to nearby buildings with a series of tunnels.

"It quite literally was a very, very impressive defensive position and they could have easily waited out a long time in there and not been hurt," Hiltz said.

All through the day, Charlie Company pounded the White Schoolhouse with 25−mm cannons mounted on the LAVs, along with .60−calibre machine−gun fire.

The LAV ammo had no trouble reaching the White Schoolhouse about 1.6 kilometres away, and almost no fire was being returned at the Canadians.

Overhead, there was a constant parade of coalition aircraft raining 500−pound and 1,000−pound bombs on the Taliban positions on the north side of the river.

On the ground, Sergeant Jim Myler of St. John's, N.L., was Charlie Company's vital link with the aircraft above.

Myler was the forward air controller and he was responsible for directing the air strikes onto Taliban positions, including the White Schoolhouse.

Equipped with a telescope, radio, global positioning system and night vision equipment, Myler was tasked with delivering the bombing co−ordinates to the F−15s, F−16s, F−18s, A−10s and B−1 bombers that were at the disposal of the coalition's ground forces.

"Who wouldn't like it," Myler said of his job. "I get to go out, put a radio on my back and I control a multimillion−dollar aircraft.

"The pilot listens to all my commands, he's like my robot," Myler added with a laugh. "It's a huge responsibility, but a great one at the same time."

The aircraft travelled in pairs, and from the time they entered the airspace over Panjwaii, Myler's job was to guide them to the targets.

They'd communicate to each other using their radio call signs −− Myler's handle was "Flare."

"One guy's throwing the business while the other guy's covering," explained Myler. "Those two would leave and two more would come."

The air strikes continued all Saturday and through the night.

"Planes, choppers, bombers, the whole nine yards were going all the time, so that was normal," said Kinden. "To hear the planes, it was like hearing the crickets at night: you don't pay any attention to them any more."

The plan was to soften up the enemy for a few days with constant long−range bombardment and air strikes. Through the day, a bulldozer and front−end loader plowed makeshift roads down to the river bed.

"The initial objective of why we took the hill was to assess the insurgency, see what the Taliban was doing there, and try to find their strong points," said Sprague. "At the end of that, we were to move across."

But at some point Saturday, the decision was made higher up the chain of command to begin the ground offensive at first light the next morning, after just one day of bombardment.

"I think because we had been bombing for the previous 18 hours and there was no resistance, I believe in my mind that someone was convinced there was nobody left there," said Myler. "I think the feeling was 'OK, they're all gone, let's get moving.'"

"There's a lot of people that have their issues with (the decision)," said Hiltz, 8 Platoon commander. "At the end of the day, we were given an order.

"It definitely wasn't fun."

For the first time since the Korean War more than half a century earlier, Canadian troops were going to launch a combat assault on a prepared enemy–held position.

"You could see it, a lot of the younger guys, they were apprehensive and it was something completely new to them," said Hiltz.

"They knew that once they were done shooting up there (on the hill), then the next step would be to go across.

"That was in the back of their minds."

Sunday, Sept. 3

At 0600, just minutes after sunrise, Operation Medusa's ground offensive began.

"We weren't supposed to leave until Tuesday, so this was much earlier than planned," said Sprague. "So we really didn't have much of a plan.

"We didn't really know what we were up against."

Charlie Company's 7 Platoon, 8 Platoon and 9 Platoon started their descent down the hillside at Ma'Sum Ghar to the Arghandab River bed below, reaching the bottom in just over an hour.

The LAVs were firing rounds from below while the air strikes continued on the White Schoolhouse from above.

None of the fire was being returned by the Taliban.

"It was very quiet," Hiltz said. "That's the whole thing, it was too quiet.

"Everybody sat there afterward and said, 'I knew something was wrong.'"

The three platoons then gathered in a flat, open field next to the riverbed that was surrounded by a berm. The heavy machinery was used to knock a couple of holes in the berm so that the LAVs could squeeze through.

On the other side of the berm was an irrigation ditch and then a field of marijuana.

The ditch was almost four metres wide and about two metres deep, so the first order of business was to fill in

part of the ditch to make a path across for the other vehicles.

Seven Platoon was to head directly toward the White Schoolhouse, with 8 Platoon providing protection from the side.

By 9 a.m., the three platoons were across the first ditch and into the field of marijuana plants.

"You couldn't see more than two feet in front of you in the field," said Sprague. "It was very bizarre."

Seven Platoon was within 50 metres of the White Schoolhouse when they reached a second ditch in the marijuana field. The plan was to once again plow a path across with the heavy equipment.

Suddenly, a red flare shot into the sky from the top of the White Schoolhouse. That was the signal.

"And then it was complete chaos all the way around," said Hiltz.

The Taliban had been patiently lying in wait and they unleashed a furious attack on the Canadians, who were trapped on three sides by the heavily armed insurgents.

Rocket−propelled grenades, machine−gun blasts, small arms fire and the deadly, powerful rounds from Chinese−made 82−mm recoilless rifles.

"They pack a bit of a kick to them," Sprague noted.

"They're actually more powerful than most of the weapon systems we have," Kinden added.

The very first rocket−propelled grenade was a direct hit on one of Charlie Company's Gelaendenwagen armoured vehicles −− G− Wagons, for short.

Seven Platoon Warrant Officer Rick Nolan, a 39−year−old from Mount Pearl, N.L., was killed with the first shot of the battle.

The second shot was also a direct hit, taking out a LAV and killing 30−year−old Sergeant Shane Stachnik of Waskatenau, Alta.

"The G−Wagon that Warrant Nolan was in, that was about 20 feet off to my left so I saw that one hit," Sprague said. "I knew we had casualties there. The second one hit 20 metres to my front, so I knew we had two sets of casualties. These were direct hits.

"It's not like you see in a movie, where a rocket hits a vehicle and it explodes in a giant ball of flame. There's a puff of dark smoke and the vehicle stops."

Corporal Jordan Lobb, a 26−year−old from Dorchester, Ont., near London, was driving one of 8 Platoon's G−Wagons when the ambush started.

8 Platoon was to the left of 7 Platoon, providing coverage to the southwest flank.

"The very first two shots were kill shots," Lobb said. "I was terrified. I had a million things going through my mind because I knew someone got hurt."

Lobb saw the explosion when Nolan's G−Wagon was hit.

"I knew instantly that it had peeled it open like a can. It was terrible."D12

Sprague's first concern was to re−establish contact with the LAV that had been hit.

He learned later that both the LAV driver and the radio had been knocked out. When the driver came to, he managed to transport some of the injured back to the casualty collection point that had been set up in the open field behind the berms by the riverbed.

Chad Kinden and 7 Platoon were at the most forward point when the ambush began.

He was looking through the periscope viewports in the turret of his LAV and he clearly remembers his first thoughts.

"'What's that? It's a fucking rocket,'" said Kinden.

"Once we came under contact, you saw no faces, you saw nothing," Kinden remembered. "All you saw were flashes and the movement of the marijuana plants.

"I can remember it ... I see it every day.

"That was the first time we had seen combat, so it was kind of like, catch your breath and let's get down to it now," said Kinden.

"It's all adrenalin. Three and a half hours went by in the snap of a finger."

Sprague, the company commander, was standing up in the hatch of his LAV, with his head sticking out so he could see above the marijuana plants.

Enemy fire was buzzing around his head. Sometimes, he said, he could feel the pressure waves from a passing rocket−propelled grenade (RPG).

"I don't know how close," he said. "Metres? Inches? Centimetres? Stuff was flying off the sides of vehicles, so I'm assuming some of it was pretty close."

Yet, he said, there was never any doubt that he'd be poking his head out the turret in the face of enemy fire.

"You can't worry about stuff coming back at you, you'd go nuts. You'd never do anything.

"I've got 300−some guys there. If I duck my head down and run away, I'm not really helping anybody. I'm probably causing more problems than I'm solving.

"If I'm going to expect my soldiers to stick their heads up and shoot, which I do, then I'd better be able to stick my head up and shoot. And if you're unwilling or unable to do those sorts of things, then you're probably in the wrong job."

Once the Taliban started firing, Hiltz, the 8 Platoon commander, grabbed his radio, jumped out of his LAV and ran up and down the lines through the marijuana field, trying to organize the troops.

"I remember seeing an RPG fly right over my head," Hiltz recalled. "If I hadn't stepped down in a ditch, it would have hit me in the face. It singed the top of my helmet.

"That was kind of a slow−motion thing I remember."

Because Hiltz was carrying a radio in the field, he was a running target for the Taliban.

"It was very obvious that they were trying to engage me," said Hiltz.

There's little emotion in his voice as he recounts in a matter−of−fact manner how bullets and rocket−propelled grenades flew past his head during the intense combat.

"I went over there expecting that kind of stuff," said Hiltz. "That's what we train for.

"Back in Canada, we do it with blanks. With this, if you make a mistake, you don't just get failed, you get killed. There's nothing I can do about that.

"It's luck, fate, God, whatever anyone wants to call it."

In the LAV next to Sprague, Myler got on his radio and began calling for air support.

"I said: 'Break, break, break, this is Flare, we're taking effective enemy fire. Are you able to come down and support us?'" Myler recalled, "And he said, 'Yeah, I can come in and support you.'"

Graham's LAV was positioned on the far left flank during the fire fight. As the driver, he was under orders to stay with his vehicle.

"He was probably sitting in his vehicle, listening to the radio and swearing," said Hiltz. "He was probably sitting there wishing he could be outside helping everybody."

"As you know, I'm here in Asscrackastan and currently writing you from my driver's hatch. We are currently in the midst of conducting our largest operation to date. We are being told it's the largest operation and objective taken by Canada since WWII. We have been conducting this operation for the past two days with a series of air and artillery ... FUCK wait out. We have been engaged!!! ... We are in a shit pot of hurt! 2X KIA!!

"I'll get back to you when I can. Who would have thought I would have picked this time to write to you!!"

−− From Mark Graham's diary, Sept. 3, 2006

Back at the casualty collection point near the riverbed, the wounded were being tended to on the ground between the berm and the company's bulldozer, which was supposed to provide some protection from the enemy fire.

But a blast from one of the Taliban's 82−mm recoilless rifles sent shrapnel flying into the middle of the casualty area.

Warrant Officer Frank Mellish, 38, of Truro, N.S., and 21−year−old Private Will Cushley of Port Lambton, Ont., were killed as they tended to their wounded comrades behind the berm.

The decisive point came a couple of hours into the battle during one of the bombing runs.

A bomb intended for the White Schoolhouse lost its guidance system in mid−air, went off course, bounced on the ground without exploding and slid to a stop next to the Canadian front−line troops.

"So you can imagine that 20 feet to the right, you see a 500−pound bomb bounce off the ground and land beside you," said Sprague, the commander.

"I sort of said, 'OK, we're kind of screwed here,' because I don't know anything about bombs and the thing could go off in two minutes or two days or two years.

"I said to myself, 'OK, it's time to get out of here.'"

Sprague made the order to retreat but it was a time−consuming, painstaking process that took a few hours.

One of the G−Wagons, a LAV and the bulldozer ended up stuck in the irrigation ditch.

A couple of members of 8 Platoon had to jump out under fire and retrieve Nolan's body from the LAV that was stuck in the ditch. After about an hour spent trying to pull the three vehicles out of the ditch, the decision was made to abandon them.

A couple of A−10 planes were sent into the area and Myler spent the rest of the afternoon and the evening directing strikes at the White Schoolhouse and strafing runs across the marijuana fields.

After the Canadians completed their retreat, air strikes were called in to drop 1,000−pound bombs on the stranded vehicles so that they couldn't be retrieved by the Taliban.

The troops gathered in the riverbed, to take stock of the situation and allow choppers to take the wounded back to Kandahar.

The mood was sombre.

"It was real quiet," said Lobb. "I was outright crying. I was bawling.

"We wanted revenge, and we were sad for our friends."

By 3 p.m., Charlie Company had retreated back to its original position on the hillside at Ma'Sum Ghar, across the river from the White Schoolhouse.

"We all wanted to go back to (Kandahar)," said Kinden. "Sit back, not get shot at. They told us no, we're not going back.

"Yeah, we were pretty pissed."

"So the shit has stopped for now. We have pulled back off our original objective. And sure as shit we have our tails between our legs. We got hit and hit hard. 6X casualties and 4X KIA including two Warrants. One was Warrant Mellish, our Warrant. He was a great man. He is the one who inspired me to stay in the ranks and become a Warrant myself.

"Anyway, I'll write you in a bit. Command is figuring what we have to do. This is going to serve as a wake−up call for all those involved."

−− From Mark Graham's diary, Sept. 3, 2006

In the line of fire Part 2

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Monday, Sept. 4

At 0300, Jim Myler was back on duty as the forward air controller after a few hours of sleep, once again guiding planes through the inky darkness of the Arghandab River valley.

It was cold that morning, the coldest since Charlie Company had arrived in Afghanistan. For the first time, heaters were turned on in the LAVs.

Sunrise would arrive at 5:44 a.m., and at first light, the Canadians were going to take another run at the White Schoolhouse.

Except this time, it would be a feint. Charlie Company would make the Taliban think that another offensive was heading straight across the river, but instead, the platoons would swoop down from the north and catch the insurgents off guard.

In preparation for the assault, Myler was directing the bombing and strafing runs on the enemy targets.

He was working with pairs of U.S. air force

A−10A Thunderbolt fighter planes, nicknamed Warthogs.

The single−seat, twin−engine planes are designed to provide close air support because of their accurate weaponry and excellent ability to manoeuvre in tight spaces.

They can carry a mix of 500−pound and 2,000−pound bombs, but their most notable feature is a 30−mm GAU−8/A seven−barrel Gatling gun that sticks out of the nose of the plane like the tip of a cigar butt between clenched teeth.

Fifty bullets spit out in the first second in a distinctive burping sound, 70 every second thereafter. That's 10 revolutions of the spinning gun barrels each second.

"You cannot mistake the sound of that gun," said Lobb. "There is nothing in this world that is like that gun."

The American A−10s were part of the USAF's 455th Air Expeditionary Wing, which was located at the Bagram Air Force Base, near Kabul, about 500 kilometres northeast of Kandahar.

Once the pair of A−10s reached the airspace around Ma'Sum Ghar, Myler would recite the target co−ordinates to the pilots by radio.

Myler would give the pilots some of the target information, and the pilots, once they were within sight of the area, would feed back more info to him.

"It's give and take between the both of us," said Myler. "I give him some target description, but not all of it, because I need to save something for him to give back to me to be sure that he has the exact area."

To Myler, the pilots were faceless radio call signs flying above. In four months directing hundreds of aircraft during his Afghanistan tour, Myler only ever met two pilots.

The usual routine would have the A−10s fly in tandem over the target area.

The lead plane would drop a bomb, and the second plane would follow behind on a strafing run to pick off any enemy on the ground attempting to flee. Sometimes, the trailing plane was there to provide cover for the lead bomber.

By 0500, the soldiers of Charlie Company were awake and preparing for the new offensive.

The LAVs were all lined up in order, by platoon number, facing north toward the White Schoolhouse. At the back of the LAVs, protected from the enemy, the ramps were down as soldiers ate breakfast, chatted and packed up their kits.

Jeremy Hiltz, 8 Platoon commander, somehow remembers that he was eating strawberry Pop Tarts in the back of his LAV at the time.

"Mark came by and he said he was going to get warm by the fire and asked if anyone wanted to come," recalled Jordan Lobb, who was just a few metres away.

Each morning, it was standard procedure for Charlie Company to burn its garbage in a fire on the ground, and on this cold morning, Mark Graham took charge of the responsibility and started a fire just a few metres from the row of LAVs.

It was no surprise to Hiltz to see Graham standing next to the fire.

"He was the guy from Jamaica, the guy who was always cold," said Hiltz. "We always teased him about that. No matter what, he was always wearing extra clothes to try to stay warm."

At one end of the line of armoured vehicles, Myler was inside his LAV working the radio, juggling two pairs of A−10s that were making runs across the Arghandab River.

The sky was clear, and light was just beginning to spill over the horizon, but the valley below was still blanketed in the dark shadows cast by the Ma'Sum Ghar mountainside.

On the second−to−last bombing run of the morning, one of the A−10 pilots told his wingman that he had just removed his night vision goggles because of the increasing light.

That simple action would have fatal consequences.

For the final run of the morning, both pairs of A−10s were going to make passes over the target and then peel off for the flight back to Bagram.

Myler provided the co−ordinates and the four pilots were already aware that the enemy was on the north side of the river and friendly positions were stationed on the south side.

The first pair dropped a 500−pound bomb on the target, which detonated successfully with a puff of smoke and fire.

The second pair of A−10s were then going to follow, identify the target that had just been hit and then both trailing planes would strafe around it.

At 0524, the lead A−10 from the final pair came rumbling over the top of the mountains that ring the Ma'Sum Ghar area.

The plane was travelling from the southwest toward the northeast, straight into the growing light just before sunrise.

The transition period from night to day is the most difficult for pilots because their night vision goggles become ineffective. But once the goggles are removed, it also takes the pilot's eyes some time to adjust to the light. At the same time, the lighting of the cockpit instrumentation has to be adjusted.

Less than a minute had passed from the time the pilot removed his goggles until he made his final strafing run of the morning.

Ahead, the horizon was light but the river and valley below were washed out in darkness.

The pilot became disoriented and looked out his cockpit window, trying to identify the fire and smoke from the bomb that had detonated seconds earlier.

On the pilot's cockpit targeting pod, the correct co−ordinates for the White Schoolhouse were on display.

But the pilot ignored the display on his screen and looked out the cockpit window instead.

He saw the garbage fire at Charlie Company's position, mistakenly thought it was the White Schoolhouse bomb site, and pointed his plane in that direction.

Then he pulled the trigger.

One second.

Two seconds.

Three seconds.

Enough time for more than 200 rounds of high−explosive ammunition to rain down on Charlie Company, most of it in a line along the back of 8 Platoon's LAVs.

"If he had checked his (display)," the government inquiry concluded, "he would have noticed the discrepancy between where his plane was pointed and the real target.

"That discrepancy should have caused him to abort that attack."

A year later, Myler still can't understand how the pilot could have made such a mistake.

"I had just worked these airplanes for almost three hours and we had continuously hit the targets time and time again," said Myler, with a hint of frustration in his voice. "He's already dropped a couple of bombs, he's already strafed it. I know that he knows where it is.

"I really don't know what was going through the poor man's head."

It's been a heavy burden on Myler's shoulders, even though the government report concluded the pilot was solely responsible for the tragedy.

"There still isn't a day that I don't think about what went down," Myler said quietly, "still not a day passes that I don't think about Mark or the guys."

As soon as the A−10's burst rang out, Myler hit the deck and dropped his handset. After a few seconds, he realized what was happening and grabbed his radio.

"Abort! Abort! Abort!" he yelled to the A−10 pilots above.

Myler's quick actions probably saved the lives of dozens of Canadian soldiers.

The second A−10 was following about 30 seconds behind, preparing to unleash another strafe.

When the second pilot saw the lead plane strafing a target, he assumed that his own instruments were wrong and rejigged his path to follow the same line toward Charlie Company.

"He was beginning to press the trigger as (Myler) yelled 'Abort, abort, abort,'" said Hiltz.

"If we didn't have him, there's probably a lot less of us who'd have come home."

At the same time, the lead pilot realized he'd made a horrible mistake and acknowledged the error over his radio. The two American pilots quickly radioed for medical assistance to come to the aid of Charlie Company.

On the ground, there were screams of panic and pain.

"They were making another pass and we didn't know if they knew that they shot the wrong target," said Lobb.

He had been standing next to his LAV, shirtless, boots undone, brushing his teeth, when the A−10 spat out its burst of ammo. He was just a couple of metres from the garbage fire at the time.

By the time the bursts were exploding, Lobb was already throwing himself to the ground.

He was hit by shrapnel in three places, including a piece on his spine, and immediately, he could feel boiling metal on his back and left leg.

"I knew my back was hit instantly because, like a reaction, I grabbed for it and my fingers fell right inside my back," said Lobb.

Matthew Sprague, the company commander, had just stepped out of his LAV at the time. He was going to toss a piece of paper into the garbage fire when the explosions rang out.

He knew instantly that the troops were being pelted with friendly fire.

"I knew right away from the sound exactly what it was," said Sprague. "It's quite amazing to see how devastating it is."

Sprague took shrapnel pieces to both sides of his head, his arm, his back and buttocks. The blasts knocked his glasses right off his face, and he was covered from head to toe in blood.

"The only way I can describe it is like someone put a whole bunch of blue sparklers in the air and starts beating the living bejesus out of you with a baseball bat," Sprague said.

Next to him, a medic had taken shrapnel in the shoulder. Sprague grabbed the medic's shoulder, the medic grabbed Sprague's head and the two of them tried to hold each other up awkwardly and crab−walk back to the LAV to find bandages.

Chad Kinden was in the back of his LAV when the A−10 fired.

"When we heard it in the LAV, we were like, 'Whoa, that was close, he must have fired right over our heads,'" Kinden said. "Then all of a sudden people are yelling and screaming, 'They're shooting at us, they're shooting at us.'"

Mark Graham was standing next to the fire, getting ready to extinguish it when a piece of shrapnel tore through his chest and pierced his aorta, the major artery that exits the heart.

He never had a chance.

Within a couple of seconds, two platoon mates were at his side, but there was nothing they could do to save him.

"I believe that when they found Mark, he was just taking his last breath," said Kinden.

After the initial panic, the scene turned quiet as the soldiers went about the business of tending to the injured.

"There were some guys there with some pretty bad injuries, and guys who'd probably never seen blood before in their lives took care of these boys," Kinden said.

About 30 seconds after the attack, Hiltz ran past the fire and checked quickly on Graham, who was stretched out flat on the ground.

"There was absolutely no response from him at all," said Hiltz. "Eventually we grabbed a blanket and put it over top of him, and later on we were able to move him."

Within minutes, a mass casualty call went out to the Kandahar airbase, and four choppers began making the 10−minute flight to Ma'Sum Ghar to take the wounded out.

By 0550, all medical staff had been called to duty at the Kandahar military hospital.

Sprague was placed on a stretcher and taken to Kandahar, where he was rushed into surgery because one of the shrapnel pieces had punctured his skull. After a CT scan, the pieces of shrapnel were removed.

"I got a couple of pieces of it, but right now, I don't where they are," he said. "They could have just found a couple of pieces of metal off the floor, for all I know."

Sprague was transferred to the U.S. military hospital in Landstuhl, Germany, along with other severely wounded soldiers, and then sent back to Canada.

Lobb, too, was flown to Kandahar but it was overloaded with casualties, so he was sent on to the Dutch military base at Tarin Kowt.

Lobb was soon returned to Canada, his tour of duty over after just a month. He's still not healed and has surgery scheduled Sept. 19 for his leg.

After all of the wounded were removed, Graham's body was flown to Kandahar.

All together, 35 Canadian soldiers were injured in the friendly fire incident, 13 seriously enough that they were returned to Canada.

Coalition forces continued their offensive in the area of the White Schoolhouse for another two weeks, reducing the target almost to rubble. NATO indicated in published reports that more than 500 Taliban insurgents were killed during Operation Medusa.

A day after the tragedy, nearly 1,000 people gathered at Kandahar airbase for a solemn, tear−filled ceremony as five flag−draped coffins were carried on to a C−130 Hercules.

Some of Charlie Company's injured soldiers hobbled on crutches up the ramp into the plane, others were pushed in wheelchairs, so they could share a final, private moment with their fallen comrades.

The following day, Graham's body and the bodies of Mellish, Cushley, Nolan and Stachnik arrived back in Canada at CFB Trenton, Ont.

On Sept. 15, 2006, in accordance with his wishes, Mark Graham was buried in the National Military Cemetery in Ottawa. That was an easy choice, according to his mother, Linda.

"Mark was very proud of being in the army," she said. "He liked pomp and circumstance and the structure of the army.

"He would have liked all the fanfare that a military funeral provided for him."

FFF

A year has passed, but Mark Graham is certainly not forgotten.

An online condolence book in his memory contains hundreds of entries, including a couple of birthday best wishes in May, and new entries continue to trickle in.

Many of the entries are addressed directly to him, as if he's sitting at a computer somewhere on the other end.

There's a message from a Grade 10 student in Markham who learned about Graham as part of a Remembrance Day project in class.

There's one from Amy Rodgers of Streetsboro, Ohio. She's the sister of Traci Luther, Mark Graham's longtime girlfriend and the mother of his daughter, Shae−Lynn.

"It seems like just yesterday you were sitting in my living room with my husband happily singing all 23 verses of There's A Hole In My Bucket, Dear Liza, Dear Liza," Rodgers wrote. "Now, as I am writing this, there is a hole in my heart. I want to thank you for walking into my sister Traci's life."

There's one from Jeremy White of Hamilton, who says that Mark gave him his nickname, JBone, and one from Adam White of Petawawa, who says he was so inspired by Mark's favourite biblical verse that he had it tattooed on his arm.

It was Joshua 1:9. "Be strong and of good courage. Be not afraid, neither be thou dismayed. For the Lord thy God is with thee whithersoever thou goest."

And on Jan. 13, there's a message from Daniel Graham, Mark's younger brother and "a man of few words," according to his father, Albert.

"Hey big brother Mark, I missed you soo much during Christmas," Daniel wrote. "I don't come to this site often, I can't really handle it. I know you're watching over me. Every day, I put on the same uniform you passed in and wear it with so much more pride."

Daniel is also in the army, part of a tank battalion stationed in Edmonton, and that weighs heavily on Albert Graham's mind.

He knows his youngest son wanted to be a soldier from the time he was a little boy, but Albert has lost one child already to the war.

So far, Daniel has not been deployed to Afghanistan, and "I do believe he's weighing his options, whether he wants to stay in the army," his father said.

"Personally, if he walked through that gate and said, 'I'm finished,' I would throw a party," said Albert Graham. "But that's his decision."

With the first anniversary of their son's death approaching, the Grahams are apprehensive. They expect some sleepless nights.

"But for the past 11 months, that's not very strange," Albert said. "There have been a lot of sleepless nights."

There will come a day when he'll finally be able to go through his son's belongings.

They were returned to him last year but still sit in boxes.

"I started one day and I couldn't," said Albert. "I put them back.

"I'm not ready for that yet."

FFF

"Look at the world we live in and think not of your neighbour down the street but think of your neighbour from another country. Think of their children and the plight they exist in each day. Remember this as we soldiers go and do our jobs. Remember that we go, even in the face of imminent danger, we go of our free will. Most with reason and purpose often tied to our homes, our love of country.

"Support us even in times of hardship. Without our nation's support, we have no heart, no purpose, no soul. We, the Canadian soldier."

−− From Mark Graham's diary,

About the author

Steve Buist

Veteran investigative reporter Steve Buist is a two−time National Newspaper Award winner in the Investigations category. He was also part of a team nominated for an NNA earlier this year in the Politics category. Buist has also won seven Ontario Newspaper Association awards and in 2004, he was named the ONA Journalist of the Year. He can be reached at 905−526−3226 or by e−mail at sbuist@thespec.com.

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