

## Operation Medusa in Afghanistan: Two Different Views

Readers are probably noticing a trend. At ON Point, one of the things we enjoy doing is highlighting when reports come in from the field that say two different things. This isn't so we can judge or play "gotcha" with the correspondent. On today's battlefield, finding accurate information is almost as tough for the journalist as it is for an intelligence professional. But by pointing out the differences, we often find the more accurate picture.

Our latest find comes courtesy of an individual who has spent a lot of time in dirty, nasty parts of the world. This person found two reports from Canadian newspapers about Operation Medusa, a recent sweep against the Taliban.

Two different pictures emerged. Decide for yourself which one is more accurate:

## Inspiring tale of triumph over Taliban not all it seems

GRAEME SMITH

From Saturday's Globe and Mail

The official story of Operation Medusa has been repeated many times in recent days, after NATO declared success with its biggest offensive to date in Afghanistan.

In speeches from Kabul to Washington, military commanders described the two-week campaign as a simple, clear-cut triumph: The Taliban entrenched themselves in a swath of terrain, terrorizing local villagers; Canadian soldiers led a massive assault, killing more than 1,000 Taliban and routing others; and now villagers are welcoming the return of government rule. Military officials say the operation may have destroyed up to one third of the insurgency's hardcore ranks.

It's an inspiring tale, as the North Atlantic Treaty Organization calls on members for more troops and struggles to gain support for the war.

But interviews with tribal elders, farmers and senior officials in the city of Kandahar suggest a version of events that is more complicated, and less reassuring.

### Related to this article



Canadian and U.S. troops defend a cluster of mud-walled farms and houses in Panjwai District during Operation Medusa. (Graeme Smith/The Globe and Mail)

Many of the fighters killed — perhaps half of them, by one estimate — were not Taliban stalwarts, but local farmers who reportedly revolted against corrupt policing and tribal persecution. It appears the Taliban did not choose the Panjwai district as a battleground merely because the irrigation trenches and dry canals provided good hiding places, but because many villagers were willing to give them food, shelter — even sons for the fight — in exchange for freedom from the local authorities.

The government has regained control of this restive district southwest of Kandahar city, and has promised to muster donations from Canada and other countries to rebuild. The Canadian military

says it will help local security forces establish a new base to make sure the Taliban do not return to Panjwai.

But there are troubling signs that the area may be sliding back toward the same conditions that sparked the violent revolt.

Unconfirmed reports suggest that Taliban fighters continue to lurk around the district, and that police in the area have resumed the abusive tactics that originally ignited local anger. Farmers say gangs of policemen, often their tribal rivals, have swept into Panjwai behind the Canadian troops to search for valuables. They have been described ransacking homes, burning shops and conducting shakedowns at checkpoints.

"This is a case of bad governance," said Talatbek Masadykov, head of the United Nations mission in southern Afghanistan.

"Maybe half of these so-called anti-government elements acting here in this area of the south, they had to join this Taliban movement because of the misbehaviour of these bad guys," Mr. Masadykov said, referring to undisciplined local police.

Police commanders in Kandahar city declined to be interviewed. The allegations from local farmers are difficult to confirm, because it has been only two days since Panjwai was deemed safe enough for civilians to return home, and the area remains too dangerous for Western journalists to visit.

But even politicians who generally support the government concede that the situation in Panjwai was aggravated by the missteps of local authorities.

The most notorious of the blunders was the case of Abdul Razik. Last month, concerned about the growing number of Taliban on the doorstep of Kandahar city, the provincial government assigned Mr. Razik to clear insurgents from Panjwai. Mr. Razik serves as a police commander in Spin Boldak, near the Pakistani border, but his fighters have a reputation as a kind of militia, all drawn from the same tribe: the Achakzai, a branch of the Pashtun ethnic group.

In the borderlands, the Achakzai often feud with another Pashtun tribe, the Noorzai. The two tribes also dominate the strip of farmland in Panjwai where Mr. Razik was dispatched, although the tribes have usually co-existed peacefully — until the arrival of Mr. Razik. Word spread quickly through Panjwai that the police commander intended to kill not only Taliban but any member of the Noorzai tribe; true or not, Mr. Razik soon found himself facing an armed uprising. His men were ambushed southwest of the village of Panjwai District Centre, and many of their bodies were left rotting on the road as Mr. Razik retreated to the borderlands.

But having fought off Mr. Razik, the local Noorzai tribesmen soon ended up fighting his more disciplined colleagues from the police and Afghan National Army.

"This was a bad idea, to bring Abdul Razik," said Haji Mohammed Qassam, a provincial council member in Kandahar with responsibility for security issues.

"One village had 10 or 20 fighters against the government before he came, and the next day, maybe 200."

It was only one example among many complaints cited by people from Panjwai as they described the deteriorating relations between locals and the government. Well before Mr. Razik's arrival, villagers say, they were subject to police stealing their cash, cellphones and watches. Even motorbikes and cars were seized by police patrols, locals say.

Abid, 32, a farmer from the Pashmul area, roughly 15 kilometres southwest of Kandahar, said the thievery by police got so frequent that his friend tried a novel tactic when he encountered a checkpoint two months ago.

Rolling toward a roadblock on a motorbike in the late evening, he said, his friend turned off the motor and started coasting toward the police.

"He took the keys out of the ignition and threw them into the bushes, so they couldn't steal it," Abid said. "This made them angry. They beat him, took his money and his watch. But he kept his bike."

The depredations stopped as the Taliban gained control of the area, villagers said. The insurgents imposed a strict order; some reports suggested they had returned to their habit of cutting off thieves' hands.

Abdul Ahad, 44, a wealthy farmer and landowner from the village of Sangisar, said he appreciated the Taliban, despite the terror he felt every time he passed through one of their checkpoints.

In a recent interview, Mr. Ahad removed a black leather diary from his \*\*\* pocket and showed a reporter where he had scribbled a few numbers for government officials. Those numbers could have got him killed, he said, if the Taliban had found the diary during their regular searches at checkpoints, because the fighters would have assumed he is a spy.

Still, risking death at the roadblocks was better, he said, than the random thievery and beatings meted out by the Afghan police.

"The Taliban didn't take any tolls at the checkpoints," Mr. Ahad said. "Even when they came to my farm, they did not eat my grapes without permission."

The Taliban also endeared themselves to the locals by returning to their roots as a protest movement. The name Taliban first gained notoriety in Afghanistan in 1992, after a group of religious students started attacking the roadblocks in Panjwai to remove the corrupt *jihadi* commanders who once waged holy war against the Soviets but had settled into gangsterism after the Soviet withdrawal.

"Policemen [now] are like *jihadi* commanders in the past," said Mr. Masadykov, at the UN office in Kandahar.

"They are misbehaving sometimes, looting, going to search and at the same time stealing everything in the houses. We are receiving a lot of complaints about it. We have to work on it."

Mr. Qassam said the government has learned from its Panjwai experience and will try to avoid repeating it. Taliban are now infiltrating the Khakrez district, he said, but the government will try sending more disciplined Afghan forces to maintain order, rather than requesting an onslaught of NATO power.

Mr. Qassam also emphasized an aspect of NATO's story about Operation Medusa that few people in Kandahar question: The city itself now feels a little more secure.

The encroaching insurgency had left the educated city dwellers feeling unsafe. Housing prices, and even vehicle prices, were depressed in recent months. Some locals reported rental fees falling as much as ten times lower than last year's rates.

Merchants in the city were even sending packages of phone cards and cash to the Taliban in Panjwai, hoping to curry favour with the insurgents in case they overran the provincial capital, Mr. Qassam said.

"When the Taliban were in Panjwai, all the people in this area were worrying: 'Where will I move my family?'" Mr. Qassam said. "They are more relaxed and happy now."

----- (an earlier report) -----

The Sunday Times September 17, 2006

# Key strike puts Taliban to flight

Michael Smith, Kandahar

BRITISH special forces have played a key role in a defeat of the Taliban as part of Operation Medusa, the largest combat operation ever mounted by Nato. Over the past fortnight Nato troops, led by the Canadians, have driven the Taliban out of the strategically important Panjwayi district between Maiwand and Kandahar.

Last week members of the newly formed British Special Forces Support Group (SFSG) pulled out of their hides to the southeast of Maiwand with their commanders satisfied that the Taliban had been defeated and expelled from the area.

"They chose to take us on," said a senior Nato officer. "They have suffered heavy casualties. In fact, they haven't suffered such extensive casualties since the fighting in 2001-02."

The British special forces had spent the first 10 days guarding against any Taliban reinforcement from the west, and the last few picking off fleeing insurgents. Senior officers cautioned that while Operation Medusa had been "a tactical success", there was no room for complacency and nobody was about to use the word victory. "It has a tendency to come back and bite you on the \*\*\*," one officer said.

This battlefield has a profound historical resonance. Maiwand was the scene of one of the most devastating defeats ever suffered by the British when, in July 1880, 2,700 British and Indian troops were outnumbered 10 to one by Afghan tribesmen. More than 1,000 British and Indian troops died but 7,000 of the enemy were killed in what was a pyrrhic victory for the Afghans.

The British suffered losses in the latest battle - 14 dead when a Nimrod spyplane crashed on the first day, including signallers from the Special Boat Service (SBS) and the SFSG who were relaying intelligence collected by RAF colleagues. Five Canadian and two Afghan soldiers were killed on the ground. But Nato claimed that more than 500 Taliban - a third of those making a stand at Panjwayi - were killed.

The Taliban were using the area as a forward operations base to put pressure on the city of Kandahar, which is seen as the key to controlling the south. During the Soviet occupation of the 1980s, the mujaheddin occupied the area, which is covered with grapevines, wheat and poppy fields, making it an ideal supply base for an insurgent army. It is riddled with drainage ditches and high walled compounds providing perfect cover for a marauding guerrilla band and there are scores of escape tunnels and trenches built during the mujaheddin days.

General David Richards, the Nato commander, chose the area to demonstrate to the 70% of the population who, he believes, will back whoever appears stronger, that Nato and not the Taliban is in charge. Richards had prepared the ground carefully. His commanders talked to tribal leaders to persuade the 40,000 population to leave for their own safety and to convince them that the alliance would rebuild once the Taliban had left.

The battle, which pitted more than 2,000 troops against 1,500 Taliban, opened on Saturday September 2 with a salvo of gunfire from Canadian and Dutch artillery. A company of 150 men from the Princess Patricia's Canadian Light Infantry

advanced across the Arghandab river.

But the Taliban were lying in wait and the company took the brunt of their aggression, coming under intense mortar and machinegun fire that killed four Canadians. The Canadian commander temporarily withdrew his forces and replaced them with Taskforce Grizzly, comprising 200 Afghan infantry backed up by US troops. On the left flank, Taskforce 31, comprising SBS and US Army Special Forces, were used temporarily to "shape the battlefield", seizing the initiative from the Taliban.

Two other companies of the Princess Patricia's were making slow progress against a Taliban trench system in the north. The third company was redirected to join the push, along with US infantry. They were backed up by direct fire support from Canadian and Dutch artillery and by air support from Apache attack helicopters, US B1 Lancer bombers, F16s, and US A10 Tankbusters - one of which killed a fifth Canadian soldier with "friendly fire" - plus RAF Harrier GR7s.

While the SBS and the US Special Forces gave the Nato advance a kick-start from the south, other US special operations troops spread across the area to the south of the battlefield. They were ordered to keep out Taliban reinforcements and supply columns attempting to make their way along the desert roads from the Pakistani towns of Nuski and Quetta.

The UK and US special forces boosted the southern advance considerably and after a few days the SBS were withdrawn and reassigned to other tasks. To the north, the Canadians, whose light armoured vehicles were vulnerable to rocket-propelled grenades, were struggling. By the beginning of last week, an operation scheduled to last only 10 days looked like lasting a month.

But sustained aerial and artillery bombardment were beginning to tell on the Taliban. Suddenly one company of the Princess Patricia's made a breakthrough, pushing forward to hold a position well ahead of the Canadian lines. A second company pushed forward and very soon all three Canadian companies were leap-frogging each other to the point that the American infantry could be withdrawn.

The effect was like a vice, squeezing the Taliban out to the west where they were awaited by Dutch infantry, a Danish armoured reconnaissance company and, further out towards Maiwand, the British SFSG, mostly former paratroopers. By the end of last week, the vast majority of the Taliban were thought to have fled.

Senior Nato officers expressed astonishment that the Taliban had abandoned traditional guerrilla tactics that would have seen them dispersing the minute heavy artillery and aerial firepower were introduced. "The next three to six months is a crucial period here," Richards said. "We are establishing psychological ascendancy over the Taliban in Panjwayi. "Operation Medusa has not been about killing for no reason. The people there want to believe we can win and we're beginning to demonstrate that we will win."

Published Tuesday, September 26, 2006 8:04 AM

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## Comments

[JC Rawley](#) said:

Clearly the world is much more complex than the black/white (or black hats/white hats) version that our Administration keeps repeating like a mantra repeated over and over in some sort of prayer ritual.

The fact is that many of the "terrorists" caught during the original invasion of Afghanistan (and now in Guantanamo or one of the secret CIA prisons) were fighting corruption as in the first case or even shopped out by local warlords as "tribute" to the new invaders to show their loyalty to the new regime.

Afghanistan is probably the poorest country in the world. It seems to have no minerals or even oil to offer the people some sort of respite from the opium growers that seem to be the only chance at financial independence for the average person.

The Taliban may have been awful people but they had great PR in their country for "doing good" or at least "doing different" from the old regimes.

If we want to defeat the Taliban and their supporters, it will not be done by bombings and massacres alone.

I recommend the Thomas PM Barnett books on the New Pentagon's Map and Bridging the Gap . They will offer, as Col. Hammes book did, a great insight into how we might win more peaces instead of winning wars and losing the peace.

September 26, 2006 10:27 AM

**membrain said:**

With respect to the article published in the Globe and Mail you have to realize that they have an far left wing anti-war agenda the makes the New York Times look like Neo-Cons!! They are not a credible source for reporting from Afghanistan.

The British Arcticle was the more accurate of the two. The idea that the locals liked the Taliban is pure bulls\*\*\*! Thes are people that use to hold public executions for such 'crimes' as not having a long enough beard.

September 26, 2006 12:42 PM

**JC Rawley said:**

Sorry membrain,

The Globe and Mail, Canada's National Newspaper, has a distinctly Right of center point of view.

It is by no means a left wing paper.

It is reporting things you do not like therefore you call it a name.

BTW, the NY Times is one of Bush's biggest supporters. They helped him sell the war and continue to report and support it as one of his better "accomplishments".

Perhaps it is time people put down the Kool-aid and look at the pig with lipstick for what it truly is.

September 26, 2006 1:14 PM

**Gary VW said:**

A persons "truth" is primarily derived from ones own perceptions.

If all the info that was given to the reporter(s) was factual, & not misconstrued, or reformatted, in any manner, then both stories have some "truth" in them.

September 26, 2006 2:55 PM

**CPT Thomas C. Nield said:**

I am an Information Operations Officer for TF Aegis (RC-S) and was involved with the planning of Op Medusa. Graeme Smith's article is pretty accurate. The locals of Panjwayi offered support for the Taliban because local governance was corrupt.

As an officer with access to classified material, I have to say that both articles are pretty accurate. I am surprised that the SF involvement (especially British SF) was mentioned because the first rule of fight club is that you don't talk about fight club. Anyway, the area of Panjwayi is key terrain. It controls access to Kandahar City from the west and it is the only defensible area near Kandahar City. The Russians lost an entire division in the Pashmul area of Panjwayi. NATO forces achieved what the Russians could not.

Op Medusa established the security credentials of ISAF/NATO, the challenge now is Phase 4, Reconstruction. We are trying to get aid in there and to shore up a previously non-existent credible security presence (Afghan and NATO).

Myself and my boss, a Canadian Major, personally escorted media to Pashmul to witness the aid distributions and to give them the opportunity to interview the locals. Graeme Smith elected to not go because he typically likes to interview locals without military guys around. Carlotta Gall (NY Times), Susanne Koelbl (Der Spiegel), Declan Walsh (the Guardian), and Jim (Canadian Broadcasting Co) did go and got the interviews with Grizzly 6 and the locals that they wanted.

The articles Graeme Smith produces are pretty accurate most of the time. He works really hard at getting the locals to open up. Sometimes what he writes causes a little heartburn but we know that he isn't being malicious. Sometimes the truth hurts.

September 26, 2006 3:40 PM

**ted mauro said:**

I am EXTREMELY pleased with both these articles and this site. We need to look at all sources to make the best choices so all our troops can be safe and all our decisions correct. While this isn't always possible it should ever remain our goal for the leaders and the voters of our GREAT nation. Thank you for this service.

September 26, 2006

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