

By Nigel Green, research associate, UK Defence Forum

More than 500 Royal Marines have taken part in a massive operation against the Taliban in Afghanistan which utilised both hard and soft power. Supported by 60 Afghan National Army soldiers, the marines spent one month in the field, killing suicide bombers and dealing with ambushes by insurgents armed with AK47s and RPGs. Ministry of Defence sources say dozens of Taliban fighters were killed, while the commandos suffered no serious injuries.

Operation Aabi Toorah, which is Pashtu for Blue Sword, is the biggest raid of its kind in the so-called Fish Hook area, where the River Helmand bends tightly as it makes its way through the green zone, around 60 miles south of Garmsir. As well as disrupting the enemy, the aim was to gather intelligence on an area that is rarely-visited by ISAF troops. Around 300 Royal Marines were inserted by Chinook helicopters and the remainder traveled in armoured vehicles, including Viking and Jackals. The force was bolstered with specialist Non-Kinetic Effects Teams (NKETs) ♦ experts in the Baluch and Pashtun culture ♦ who were able to help gather intelligence. During the first week, the force held meetings called Shuras with local elders and left with what they described as a "wealth of information".

This prepared them for the second and more aggressive part of the operation around Khan Neshin, a settlement surrounding an ancient fort and a bazaar known for drug and weapon dealing. The area had been identified by intelligence as a hotbed of Taliban activity. Before dawn, the men of Lima Company 42 Commando Group left their desert hideaway in Viking vehicles before 'yomping' the final few miles over tough terrain. As they broke into the village, compounds were secured and searched, with the Afghan forces taking the lead. A number of insurgent-held compounds were discovered and bitter close-quarter fighting broke out, with the commandos and Taliban trading grenades over compound walls.

There were regular sporadic attacks and ambushes using automatic rifles and rocket-propelled grenades, but they were suppressed and the enemy fled. Two suicide bombers managed to blow themselves up within a few metres of the marines but nobody else was injured. As the marines moved through the town, the fighting intensified as they got closer to the main bazaar. With the insurgents attacking from within the town, an Apache attack helicopter was called in and its 30mm cannon suppressed the firing. Raw opium, weapons and ammunition, including AK-47 variant rifles and RPGs, were seized, along with two suicide vests.

Ed Stout, Company Sergeant Major of Lima Company 42 Commando Group, said: "Our engagements with the insurgents only ever end one way. Our overmatch is simply too much for the enemy. We are quite happy to engage him - it plays to our strengths as commandos and allows us demonstrate our capability to everyone in the area. We can disrupt the insurgent and empower the locals in the same few days. It works."

More shuras were held and, with the consent of the village elders, commando medics and a dentist set up a temporary clinic. Major Neil Willson, Chief of Staff 42 Commando Group, said: "If we can present a human face, an understanding of local culture, customs and sensitivities, and show that we are honorable warriors in the face of the insurgency, the locals engage with us and respond positively. They offer honest feedback on their situation and a degree of hospitality that is frankly humbling. I think we have moved the ball forward significantly in this area."

The final phase of the operation saw the marines launch a surprise move to the western villages of Malakhan and Taghaz, just a few miles from the border of Nimruz Province. Through a series of shuras, the marines and Afghan troops discussed the priorities for the local people and how ISAF forces can tackle the Taliban. The force extracted back to Camp Bastion where they began the job of analysing and processing the information they had gathered. Lt Col Charlie Stickland Royal Marines, Commanding Officer 42 Commando Group, said: "Before our

arrival no-one knew what was here. It was largely a blank map. We have walked, fought and talked across a huge area and operated at huge reach. We have drunk endless cups of tea with the local Afghans, and as ISAF's advance party we have set up the government-coalition partnership for significant success here.

"This was a reconnaissance in force, and the key was agility, in terms of manoeuvre across a huge area by day and night, through long range desert patrols, helicopter insertion, and a reassuring posture when amongst the villagers. By appearing unexpected at a time and place of our choosing we owned the space, causing uncertainty in the insurgent's mind, disrupting his plans. The many shuras we have held are crucial to generating a real and meaningful understanding of this area, and that was my mission. We have achieved more than we could have imagined a month ago, and ultimately this comes down to the robustness of the marines and soldiers of the commando group, who can operate at such intensity for a month."

* Pictures by LA(Phot) Gaz Faulkner 42 Commando Royal Marines