By Anthony King

On 19 June 2006, British troops from 16 Air Assault Brigade's 3rd Battalion The Parachute Regiment, deployed into Sangin. It was and remains a defining moment of the Helmand campaign.

The circumstances of the deployment are instructive. The commander of 16 Air Assault Brigadier, Brigadier Ed Butler who had just flown into Lashkar Gar, contacted Lieutenant Colonel Stuart Tootal, the Commanding Officer of 3 PARA, on the radio: 'Stuart, we have got reports coming in that the district centre is about to fall. If we are going to reduce the risks to helicopters we need to use the cover of darkness and go before first light. Given that dawn is less than three hours away, I need to know whether you can launch the mission in the next 90 minutes'.

Tootal and his tactical headquarters 'quickly rehashed the pros and cons', rightly observing that they 'were here to support the government of Afghanistan'. However, the ultimate impetus for insertion was primarily regimental: 'Finally we were Paras and being asked to do difficult and risky things was what we were meant to be about'. Tootal confirmed that he was ready to deploy for a 24 hour operation only 20 minutes after Ed Butler's initial communication.

Four years and over a 120 dead British soldiers later, the withdrawal of British troops from Sangin has just been announced. Having lost 13 men (including attachments) in two months, 40 Commando Royal Marines, who are currently holding the line in the Upper Sangin Valley, will be replaced by a US Marine Corps brigade in the coming months. The Marines will suffer numerous casualties in Sangin but they, unlike the British, may have the combat power to secure the area.

It is clear now that Ed Butler and subsequent British commanders underestimated the scale of the problem in Sangin. Sangin is a dense population centre some 30 miles north-east of Lashkar Gar and its location and geography present intense difficulties for any security force.

Sangin is on the junction of the Helmand and the Musa Qala Rivers and has long been the centre of narco-trafficking in southern Afghanistan with routes running north to Kabul, east to Kandahar and west to Iran.

As a result of its association with drugs trafficking, Sangin is deeply significant to local magnates, including the Taliban, whose wealth and power is based on opium. In 2006, Sher Mohammend Akhundzada, who was the governor of Helmand under Karzai until his removal in 2005 when nine tonnes of heroin was found in his compound by the FCO, was one of the most powerful figures in the valley. His family influence endures to this day.

The presence of unwanted British troops represented a serious challenge to the dominant economic and political interests in Sangin, precipitating much of the fighting. Further complicating the situation,

the Upper Sangin Valley is fragmented by tribal and communal politics which has engendered high levels of hostility not only between the villages but towards any outsiders. Moreover, in the summer, the irrigated fields around the Helmand River become as vegetated as jungle while each farm compound, with thick mud-baked walls, forms perfect defensive positions; it is close and difficult country.

Apparently ignorant of the political and geographic complexities of Sangin, British troops were rapidly engaged in a desperate battle of survival in Sangin. On several occasion in 2006, the platoon house in Sangin district centre was in danger of being overrun and from 2008, as insurgents changed their tactics, British troops have been encased in belts of IEDs which have now costs scores of lives and prevented any substantial progress.

In many cases from 2006 right up to the present, the British have not been fighting a unified insurgency with a clearly identifiable goal: the 'Taliban'. More typically, British troops have been engaged by local tribal militias (some associated with Akhundzada himself) often making alliances of convenience with local Taliban commanders who bring with them additional skills, resources and fighters.

The withdrawal from Sangin is necessarily an admission of failure — at least to some degree. British commanders did not understand the political dynamics in the valley and, crucially, despite a worsening situation from 2008, have been unable to generate sufficient force ratios to pacify the hostile population.

In a sense, the Upper Sangin Valley had echoes with the Ypres Salient in the First World War. In both cases, British forces were accidentally deployed into an unfavourable tactical situation from which, constrained by political imperatives, they could neither withdraw nor which they could improve. As on the western front, British infantry soldiers have simply had to endure in Sangin for four years.

Nevertheless, although the Sangin episode should certainly be sobering to officers up and down the chain of command and might usefully feature as a historical lesson on future staff courses, the withdrawal is only a local set-back. It is not evidence of the failure of the British campaign in Helmand more widely. On the contrary, the withdrawal should be welcomed. Since December 2008, British commanders have sought quite properly to focus on the central population area of Helmand in and around Lashkar Gar. Operations Sond Chara and Panchai Palang were evidence of this attempt to concentrate forces in that decisive ink-spot and, in February 2010, Operation Moshtarak was successful in deepening security around Lashkar Gar, in Nad-e-Ali and Narah-e-Saraj. British troops have sought to strengthen their hold of these areas since that time.

The relief of 40 Commando from Sangin — and future battle-groups that would have been stationed there—will be a major benefit to the prosecution of Britain's campaign in this area. It will provide commanders with the resources to execute a now coherent counter-insurgency plan.

In addition, it will reduce the logistics burden on the Helmand Task Force very considerably. In

2006, British paratroopers nearly starved in Sangin and eventually had to be supplied by a Canadian column in armoured vehicles. Logistics in Sangin improved thereafter, but sustaining operations in the Upper Sangin Valley has been a severe logistical problem. Every month, a Combat Logistic Patrol of some 200 vehicles, escorted by Apache and preceded by reconnaissance troops, has had to be driven from Camp Bastion, along Highway 1 and then up the desert, parallel to the IED-ed Route 611, to supply the Operating Bases in and around Sangin. These Patrols have represented British military ingenuity at its best but they also demonstrate the mistake of deploying into Sangin in the first place without the troop numbers to secure the lines of communication. For the last four years, Task Force Helmand has conducted a counter-insurgency operation on highly unfavourable exterior lines of communication.

The withdrawal from Sangin alters the entire geometry of the campaign in a single stroke. British forces are concentrated in the centre of Helmand close to the Main Operating Base at Camp Bastion with a vastly diminished logistics burden and reduced lines of communication. Current and future British commanders will benefit hugely from the increased tempo which follows this rationalisation of the force lay-down.

After the withdrawal from Sangin, Britain's Task Force Helmand will control an area of just over 200 square kilometres while the US Marines Expeditionary Force has taken command not only of Helmand but also of Nimroz and Farah as the new Regional Command South West.

Britain's mission has shrunk while the American contribution has expanded dramatically. This re-balancing of effort may deflate British pretensions somewhat. Yet, ironically, the current area of operation to which the British mission has been reduced is precisely the area identified in 2005 in the initial UK plan for Helmand.

The Bastion-Lashkar Gar-Gereshk triangle, where all UK troops now operate, was then rightly seen both as the decisive and as a manageable area for the level of the British commitment. The British concept of operations in this area is now coherent and mature; it represents the most likely chance of success in the province.

However, even with this increase of force ratios and logistical relief which the withdrawal will bring, British commanders might remember the central lesson of Sangin. Afghanistan is all about politics and even the 10,000 troops now dedicated to Lashkar Gar and its environs will not alone be enough if

British military and civilian leaders fail to understand and engage with the key political actors in Helmand.

It is finally these leaders, the powerbrokers, who will bring peace to Afghanistan, not NATO's forces however brave and skilful they have been.

About the author

Anthony King is a Professor in Sociology at the University of Exeter. His main areas of research are football, social theory and latterly, the military.

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