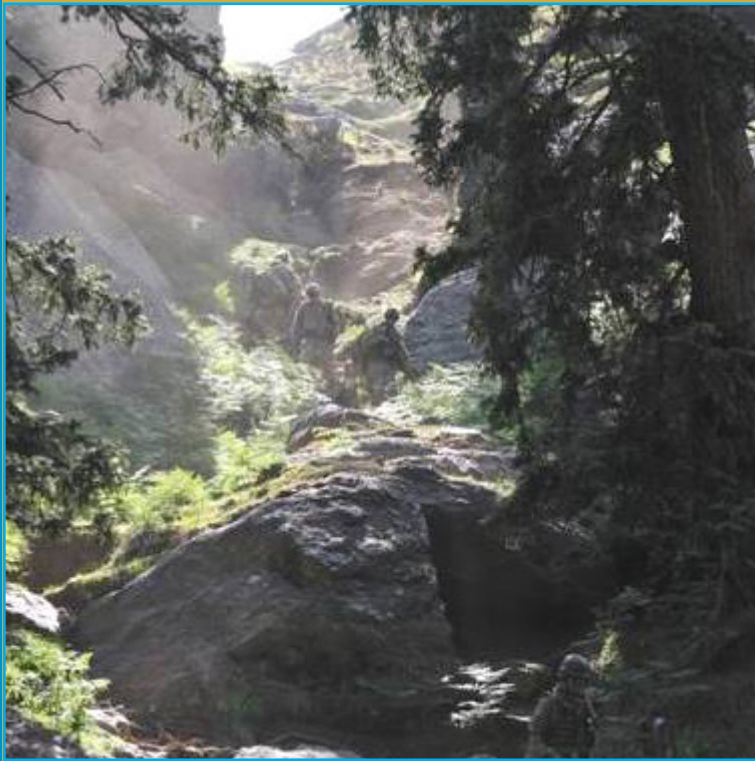


HAMMER DOWN

The Battle for the Watapur Valley, 2011



Ryan D. Wadle, Ph. D.



**Combat Studies Institute Press
US Army Combined Arms Center
Fort Leavenworth, Kansas**

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Volume III of the Vanguard of Valor series



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Foreword

With this third installment of the *Vanguard of Valor* series, the Combat Studies Institute transitions from the anthology format of the previous two volumes to one that focuses on the actions of a single unit and operation. *HAMMER DOWN* is the story of a tactical operation conducted by the Soldiers of 2d Battalion, 35th Infantry Regiment, of the 3d Brigade Combat Team of the 25th Infantry Division, in partnership with units of the Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF). Known as *Task Force Cacti*, this unit's experience in the Watapur Valley of Nuristan Province in June 2011 well illustrates the challenges of combat in the mountains of Regional Command-East, where the terrain was a constant and at times a more formidable enemy than the *Taliban*, *HiG*, or *al Qaeda* fighters.

Coalition forces executed Operation HAMMER DOWN in an area immediately to the east of the Waygal River valley. Among the enemy fighters who squared off against *TF Cacti*, some undoubtedly were men who had fought the Coalition in the adjacent Pech and Korengal valleys since 2005, including men who participated in the coordinated attack on Combat Outpost Kahler at Wanat three years earlier. Just as likely, *TF Cacti* included veterans of previous deployments to Nuristan, who were well acquainted with the unique challenges involved in attempting to pacify this region. It is important for the reader to remember these connections and understand the role that past experience played in determining the actions of both sides during the fighting in and around the village of Gambir. By June 2011, both sides understood the other's capabilities quite well. Tactical surprise was difficult for either side to achieve, which meant that every engagement was essentially a meeting engagement. In such an environment, logistical preparation, integration of enablers, and above all small-unit leadership must provide the margin for victory.

For nearly 35 years, CSI has used historical studies such as this one to help leaders everywhere benefit from the experiences of a very few. *Vanguard of Valor III* fully delivers on that promise. I am confident readers will find personal inspiration in this story, as well as professional leadership lessons applicable well beyond the scope of operations in Afghanistan.

Colonel Thomas E. Hanson
Director, Combat Studies Institute

Author's Acknowledgements

First and foremost, I thank the men and women of Task Force *Cacti*, 2-35 Infantry for their willingness to cooperate so fully with this study. They proved very forthcoming in their interviews, and always made themselves available for follow-up questions or to provide maps and other information. The history in these pages is theirs.

As this study expanded to include a history of previous deployments to the Watapur Valley, I sought out personnel from Marine and Army infantry battalions who served there. Many of those interviewed had to recall places and events about which they had not thought for some time, yet all provided a wealth of detail. Their time and support of this effort greatly enriched this study, and I thank them for their valuable contributions.

I also must thank my colleagues on the Afghanistan Study Team at the Combat Studies Institute. We each brought a diverse set of experiences and knowledge to a rapidly-assembled team and learned how to adjust as a group to an ever-changing array of circumstances. I am extremely proud of the professionalism and productivity of our short-lived team. Each member provided insights, edited drafts, or offered support during the writing and assembly of this study, so this project bears their fingerprints too.

The rest of the Combat Studies Institute, including former director Colonel Rod Cox, Dr. Donald P. Wright and the rest of the Research and Publications Team, the Contemporary Operations Study Team, and the Staff Ride Team also helped shape this study. Their contributions are certainly recognized and appreciated.

I also thank my wife Jenny. She followed me to Missouri and provided invaluable love and support throughout our time there and continues to make everything worthwhile.

To Those Who Served

In memory of First Lieutenant Dimitri del Castillo, Sergeant Nigel Kelly, and Specialist Kevin Hilaman. May they rest in peace.

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Symbols for operations recounted in this work.

UNIT TYPE

American unit

Afghan Army (ANA) unit

infantry

ANA commando

GRAPHIC CONTROL MEASURES

strongpoint

helicopter landing zone

objective

planned movement

actual movement

UNIT SIZE

company

company team

platoon

ANA section

squad

TERRAIN FEATURES

foliage

elevation point

village

Coalition base

MISCELLANEOUS

enemy contact

operational phase marker

ABBREVIATIONS	
ANA	Afghan National Army
COP	combat outpost
FOB	forward operating base
HLZ	helicopter landing zone
OBJ	objective
ODA	Operational Detachment A (Special Forces)
SCT	scout
SP	strongpoint
VPB	vehicle patrol base

ix

Chapter 1

Introduction

On the afternoon of 25 June 2011, the Soldiers of Bravo Company, 2d Battalion, 35th Infantry Regiment, 3d Brigade Combat Team, 25th Infantry Division, also known as Task Force (TF) *Cacti*, entered an area of Afghanistan known as the “Gambir Jungle” as part of Operation HAMMER DOWN. The men of Bravo Company were far from the first Coalition force to try to clear the Watapur Valley. Situated at the northern end of the valley in Kunar Province and nicknamed after the imposing trees that cover the mountainside upon which the village of Gambir rests, the “Jungle” had been a focal point of several prior Coalition operations. Previous American units had attempted to forge ties with Gambir’s elders with only limited success. The previous November, a US Special Forces (SF) unit had forcibly cleared the village but conditions in the valley deteriorated yet again.

At approximately 1300, as Bravo Company closed on the outskirts of Gambir to begin clearing the village, the forest came alive with gunfire. Within minutes, the senior leadership of Bravo Company suffered severe blows as the leader of 1st Platoon, First Lieutenant Dimitri del Castillo, died in the initial onslaught and the company’s commander and fire support officer (FSO) both suffered injuries requiring their evacuation that night. The aggressive resolve of the insurgents near Gambir compelled the commander of TF *Cacti*, Lieutenant Colonel Colin Tuley, to rewrite the plan for Operation HAMMER DOWN. Originally a two-day mission to clear suspected insurgent training camps near Gambir and disrupt the flow of hostiles into the Pech River region, the operation became a weeklong fight to control key terrain and relieve the pressure on Bravo Company. Over the following seven days, the men of TF *Cacti* found themselves in a serious battle that tested their training as well as their courage.

For Operation HAMMER DOWN, US forces massed an unprecedented amount of combat power in the remote Watapur Valley. The action served as the culmination of years of combined US and Afghan operations in the area. During the decade-long campaign in Afghanistan, US forces rotated regularly to keep their manpower fresh and to maintain morale. The history of these operations in the Watapur serves as a particularly valuable account of how tactical level commanders applied lethal and non-lethal methods to control a valley. The valley had not received the same level of official or popular attention as the neighboring Waygal and Korengal Valleys. Yet, no US unit could afford to overlook the Watapur

valley and all US commanders in its vicinity deemed the area important enough to mount frequent operations there. The main reason for this was the fact that Pakistani-based criminals, terrorists, and insurgent groups often used the northern reaches of the Watapur to train fighters and to funnel men into the Pech Valley. The rough terrain and the transient and often-hostile population provided additional challenges to units intent on bringing stability to a restive region.

The Watapur's residents and foreign fighters active in the valley tested many of the key assumptions and limitations of the US counterinsurgency (COIN) strategy in Afghanistan. This study examines Operation HAMMER DOWN, the attempt by TF *Cacti* to mass its forces in an insurgent hotbed and apply lethal force to the problem, leading to the largest operation in the Watapur since the war began. Ultimately, TF *Cacti*'s Watapur operation served as a microcosm through which the most basic dilemma facing tactical leaders in Afghanistan, or any counterinsurgency campaign, can be better understood: as to how can commanders apply lethal operations to best achieve the campaign's objectives? Since the beginning of the Afghan campaign, many tactical level leaders faced this issue and found a variety of solutions but in isolated regions like the Watapur, where the physical conditions were arduous and the population often antagonistic, enduring success often eluded the Coalition.

The study that follows will first provide a general overview of the geographic, cultural, and historical factors which shaped the Watapur Valley and its population. In the chapter that follows, this account will detail the ways in which Coalition forces attempted to use both lethal and non-lethal operations to solve the problems posed by the Watapur between 2005 and 2010. HAMMER DOWN, TF *Cacti*'s focused offensive operation against insurgent elements in the valley, becomes the focus of the remaining chapters. The conclusion seeks to provide key factors that highlight the experience of US Soldiers in the Watapur during HAMMER DOWN, and by extension, offer general insights about how the US Army attempted to engage the isolated regions of Afghanistan that resemble the Watapur.

The Watapur Valley to 2001

Long before the execution of Operation HAMMER DOWN, the Watapur Valley and the Pech River region of Afghanistan had a long history of armed conflict. The mountainous terrain physically and culturally isolated the populace from the outside world but did not completely prevent other groups from periodically entering the region.

The Watapur is one of hundreds of valleys found in northeastern Afghanistan in what are essentially the southwestern foothills of the Hindu Kush range. The collision of tectonic plates and the flow of water courses occurring over millions of years combined to create a very mountainous region, cut by narrow gorges and small valleys. Over millions of years, the flow of the Hezerbagh River (also known as the Gambir River) had carved out a valley approximately 18 kilometers in length and varying from 5-10 kilometers wide. The flat valley floor lays in the shadows of a series of mountains and ridgelines that surround it and frequently top 3,000 meters in elevation. Where the Hezerbagh/Gambir empties into the Pech River, the valley floor was nearly one kilometer wide but narrows dramatically farther to the north, restricting passage by wheeled vehicles. The village of Shamir Kowt lies at the mouth of the valley, with the other prominent valley floor villages of Qatar Kala, Qowru, and Shahid situated farther to the north. The steep western slope of the valley limited human settlement on that side of the valley but Afghans had established several settlements on the somewhat gentler eastern slope. From south to north, the villages on the eastern slope: Tows Kala, Tsangar, Katar Darya, Sero Kalay, Gambir, and Zawardiwuz, contained most of the valley's population of between 10,000 and 20,000 people.¹

This physical environment profoundly affected the lives of the people who lived there. The terrain and isolation limited the economic opportunities available to the locals with subsistence farming and small scale goat herding remaining the most common occupations into the 21st century. The oldest known cultures in the region spoke Persian and Dardic languages that survived in this isolated environment into the 20th century. The first Western invaders, Alexander's Greeks and Macedonians, visited the area during the 4th century BC followed over the next millennia by Arabs, Turks, and Mongols. The Arab conquest of the 7th century AD brought Islam to present-day Afghanistan, although the conversion of local peoples to the Muslim faith took many centuries. Just to the north of the Pech Valley, the Afghan government in the late 19th century forcibly converted the Nuristanis, including those who live in the northern Watapur, to Islam.²

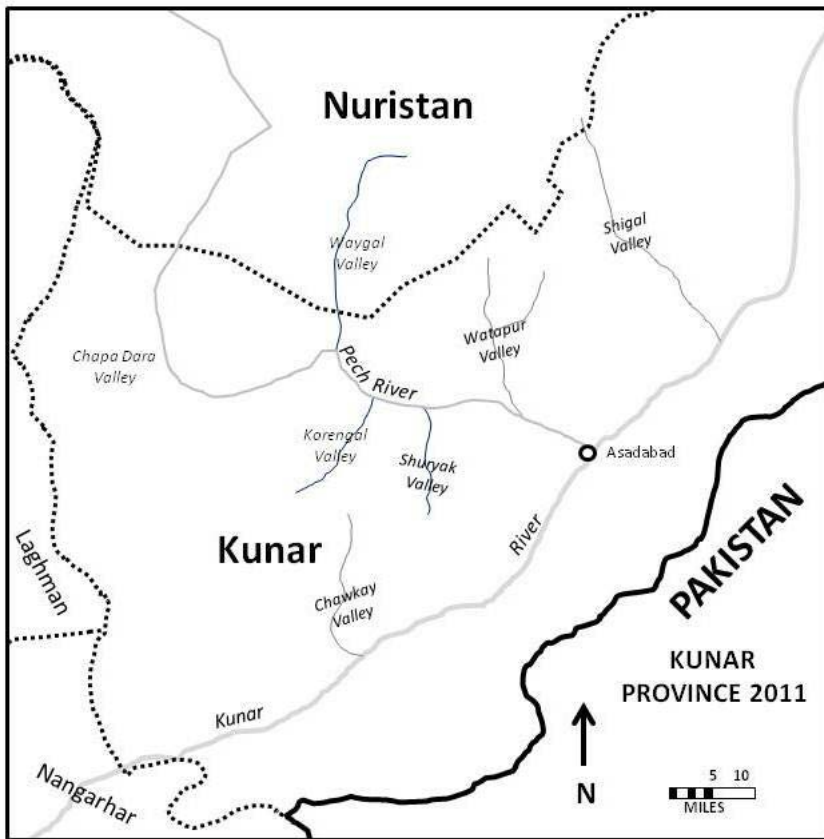


Figure 1: Kunar Province - Major Rivers and Valleys.

Source: author/CSI generated.

Afghanistan as a unified political kingdom began to coalesce in the 16th and 17th centuries as a distinct Pashtun culture which took root and formed the core of the new state. While the larger Ghilzai and Durrani Pashtun tribes jockeyed for power in Afghanistan over several centuries, the more isolated inhabitants of the Pech area instead belonged to the smaller Safi Pashtun group of the Ghurghusht Tribe. The Safis demonstrated a willingness to resist forces attempting to exert control over their homeland, especially when they constituted one of the key factions supporting the rebellion of Khushal Khan Kattack against the Mughal emperor Aurangzeb in the late 17th century. Later, the British split of the Pashtun tribes along the Durand Line in the 19th century created the border between modern Afghanistan and Pakistan.³

Three developments occurred during the mid-20th century that profoundly shaped life in the Pech Valley. First, Safi Pashtuns in what is today Kunar province briefly revolted against King Mohammed Shah's reforms in 1945 and 1946, but the king quickly and successfully put down the revolt. Perhaps not coincidentally, in the 1950s, a fundamentalist Wahhabi strain of Islam brought by missionaries from Pakistan's Bajaur Agency spread throughout the Pech and began to radicalize political and social attitudes. The king maintained power until 1973, at which point a long running internal struggle between advocates of modernization and their opponents devolved into open conflict. A series of coups allowed the Marxist People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan to take power in 1978 and the new rulers promulgated a series of reforms, including land redistribution and the granting of equal rights to women. The policies provoked a strong backlash among conservative Afghans, prompting the Safi Pashtuns of the Pech Valley and neighboring Nuristanis to revolt against the newly created Democratic Republic of Afghanistan. By March 1979, Pech residents had expelled all Afghan government forces from the valley. Other regions followed suit, and the Marxist government quickly lost legitimacy in these areas.⁴

The Soviet Union viewed the chaos in Afghanistan as a threat to its central Asian interests and initiated a military intervention in December 1979. After installing a new Afghan leader, Soviet forces fanned out into the countryside to suppress the rebellion. In a series of engagements from 10 to 15 May 1980, Soviet forces quelled the antigovernment elements in the Pech. Soviet troops air assaulted into several key locations in the valley, including Qatar Kala at the heart of the Watapur Valley. The Soviet incursion into the area scattered many of the *mujahedeen*, although some of the insurgents rallied to destroy a Soviet force at Khaki Bandy on the Pech to the west of the Watapur. This success proved short lived, however, as Soviet reinforcements in the western Pech broke the back of the rebellion. Leaders of the *mujahedeen* fled with their families and many other Pech residents, first seeking sanctuary in the more rugged regions of Nuristan, then eventually moving eastward into Pakistan where they worked to rebuild their movement. With this one operation, the Soviets had effectively quashed the insurgency in the Pech, and most subsequent fighting in the region primarily occurred in the large Kunar River Valley to the east.⁵

Between 1980 and 2002, little large-scale conflict occurred in the Pech. A Soviet force returned to the area briefly in 1986 to combat a resurgent *mujahedeen*. A decade later, the ultra-conservative Taliban

movement spread into eastern Afghanistan after rising to power in the country's southern provinces in 1994 and 1995. The Taliban took nominal control of Kunar province but militias affiliated with the Gulbuddin Hekmetyar's *Hezb-e Islami Gulbuddin* (HIG) and other local forces prevented a full military takeover and deterred Taliban forces from entering Kunar. The Pech region and much of Nuristan province existed in a no-man's land between Taliban strongholds in the south and the seat of Northern Alliance power in the Panjshir Valley to the immediate west, and neither side saw value in a large scale military intervention. This state of precarious calm existed until the 11 September 2001 terror attacks on the United States and the subsequent American intervention, which upset the balance of power in the country.⁶

Over the centuries, the population of the Watapur Valley developed fitfully as they came into contact with the myriad powers and cultural forces that swept through the region. Over time, however, the people of the region adopted a very conservative form of Islam and stood in opposition to elements of their own government, the Soviet Union, and the Taliban. By 2001, they had shown themselves ready and willing to resist any outside force they perceived as a threat to their faith and their way of life.

Notes

1. Thomas Barfield, *Afghanistan: A Cultural and Political History* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2010), 42-49, 52-53; Captain Willard Hayes, Sergeant Clayton Henry, Sergeant Eric Jones, interview by Ryan Wadle, Combat Studies Institute, Fort Leavenworth, KS, 25 July 2012, 14-15.
2. Barfield, *Afghanistan*, 25; Stephen Tanner, *Afghanistan: A Military History from Alexander the Great to the War Against the Taliban*, rev. ed. (Philadelphia: Da Capo Press, 2009), 100-107, 218.
3. Tanner, *Afghanistan*, 65, 113; Barfield, *Afghanistan*, 90-95, 232-233.
4. Barfield, *Afghanistan*, 321; Brian Glyn Williams, *Afghanistan Declassified: A Guide to America's Longest War* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2011), 62. David B. Edwards, *Before Taliban: Genealogies of the Afghan Jihad* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002), 139-145.
5. Edwards, *Before Taliban*, 158-161.
6. Williams, *Afghanistan Declassified*, 64-5; Staff of the Combat Studies Institute, *Wanat: Combat Action in Afghanistan, 2008* (Fort Leavenworth, KS: Combat Studies Institute Press, 2010), 2-3.

Chapter 2

US Operations in the Watapur Valley, 2002-2011

During the first ten years of ENDURING FREEDOM, the Watapur Valley grew increasingly important over time as the size and scope of Coalition operations in the entire Pech region expanded in response to a growing insurgency. This chapter will examine the situation in the Watapur after 2001 and the evolution of the Coalition's approach to achieving its objectives in the valley. While a succession of US Army battalions focused increasing time and energy on the valley to suppress the insurgent fighters and win support of the population, no single unit was successful. Lack of progress in the Watapur in this period would shape TF *Cacti's* decision to go into the valley with overwhelming lethal force in 2011.

The US Military in the Watapur, 2002-2007

Coalition operations in Kunar Province gradually increased over the course of the campaign in Afghanistan. In the first year of Operation ENDURING FREEDOM, US military forces made only sporadic appearances in the province. In 2002, however, American Special Operations Forces (SOF) units began operating in the area to hunt for senior Taliban and al Qaeda figures who had escaped from the Coalition. These searches were soon overshadowed when locals in Kunar province, upset by the controversial death of a local man named Abdul Wali while in Coalition custody and angered by corruption in the new Afghan government, began opposing the Coalition with HIG and al Qaeda foreign fighter support.¹ That fall, the 2d Battalion, 505th Infantry Regiment, 3d Brigade Combat Team, 82d Airborne Division moved into the province and established a permanent outpost at Asadabad at the junction of the Kunar and Pech Rivers. In November 2003, during Operation MOUNTAIN RESOLVE, the first large scale foray into the Pech valley, the 2d Battalion, 87th Infantry Regiment, 3d Brigade Combat Team, 10th Mountain Division, established the first permanent outpost in the Pech Valley just west of the village of Nangalam. Initially named Firebase Catamount, when Soldiers from the 2d Battalion, 75th Ranger Regiment (2-75 Rangers) began using the base in December to search for high value targets (HVTs), they renamed the outpost Camp Blessing in honor of Sergeant Jay Blessing, a Ranger killed nearby in an improvised explosive device (IED) attack a month earlier.²

In late 2003, the Coalition approach to the Afghan campaign changed significantly. Lieutenant General David Barno assumed command of the Combined Forces Command-Afghanistan and initiated a strategic review of the campaign in Afghanistan concluding that the Coalition should

reorient its focus away from simply destroying remnant insurgent forces and towards building popular support for the Afghan government. Three years before the drafting of the US military's official counterinsurgency (COIN) doctrine, Field Manual 3-24, US forces in Afghanistan began waging a COIN campaign intended to provide the security necessary to allow a stable government to operate and for economic opportunities to grow. This change in approach pushed US forces into previously untouched parts of the country. By 2004, US Army Special Forces (SF) Operation Detachment Alpha (ODA) teams and a platoon of Marines operating from Camp Blessing, began efforts to extend the influence of Afghanistan's central government over a heretofore unreached population. The ODA team used a "carrot-and-stick" approach in which villages that refused to harbor *Taliban* or *al Qaeda* fighters or whose residents voluntarily turned over their weapons to the Americans received construction projects and other forms of aid. The villages who refused to do either of these things received nothing.³

Between 2004 and 2006, the American presence at Camp Blessing expanded significantly as Marine units assumed responsibility for the region. These forces, in combination with other US and Coalition assets, operated frequently in the Pech Valley. In particular, 2d Battalion, 3d Marine Regiment (2/3 MAR) which was the last Marine battalion to be fully responsible for the Pech, conducted several operations in the Pech's tributary valleys during their deployment from April 2005 to January 2006. During Operation PIL in late October 2005, 2/3's Fox Company under Captain Kelly Grissom visited Kur Bagh and Panjgal just to the west of the Watapur. Meanwhile, Captain Peter Capuzzi's Golf Company went to Tsangar in the center of the valley. Capuzzi's Marines found the residents of Tsangar indifferent to the Coalition presence. The Marines reported receiving very sporadic fire from isolated gunmen and suffered no major casualties during the operation. This was the first major movement into the Watapur by a US conventional maneuver unit and remained the largest operation conducted by an American unit in the valley until 2007.⁴

In March 2006, the Marines transferred control of the Pech region to the Army's 1st Battalion, 32d Infantry Regiment (1-32 IN), also known as Task Force *Chosin*. Three significant factors shaped TF *Chosin*'s deployment to Kunar. First, the battalion had responsibility for a very large area of operations (AO) spanning the provinces of Kunar, Nangarhar, Laghman, and part of Nuristan. In total, these provinces contained a population of more than 1.9 million people and covered 25,737 square kilometers. While this number was only a fraction of Afghanistan's overall

population of 25 million, covering such a large area with a single infantry battalion constituted an economy of force mission. Second, and more specific to the Pech region, US forces initially only had two significant bases in central Kunar Province: Camp Blessing at Nangalam and Camp Wright at Asadabad.

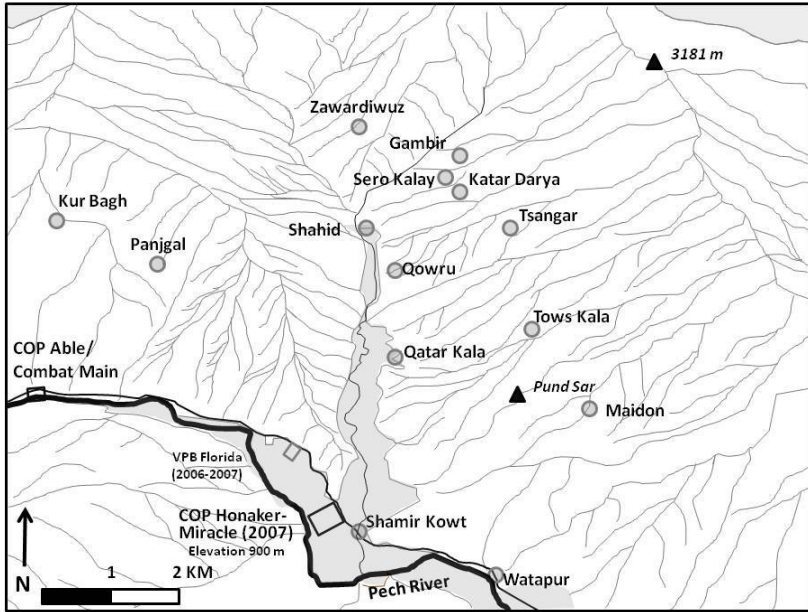


Figure 2: The Watapur Valley, 2002-2011.

Source: author/CSI generated.

The paucity of bases was indicative of the size of the Coalition commitment to Afghanistan from 2001 through 2005 but even with the meager forces at hand, expanding the military presence became a top priority for TF *Chosin* because of the third factor – a greater emphasis on population-centric COIN.⁵ The commander of TF *Chosin*, Lieutenant Colonel Christopher Cavoli, had been charged by his leadership to secure population centers in the region from insurgent influence and further the reach of the central Afghan government. This meant expanding the footprint of the Coalition presence in Kunar, Nuristan, and Nangarhar provinces.

An opportunity to establish a larger and more lasting presence in the Pech came about early in TF *Chosin*'s tour. From January through May 2006, 1st Battalion, 3d Marines (1/3 MAR) operated in northeast Afghanistan with TF *Chosin*. To take advantage of the extra military

strength, 1-32 IN, 1/3 MAR and Afghan units conducted Operation MOUNTAIN LION between 14 March and 15 May 2006. This combined force worked to extend Afghan influence into Kunar and Nuristan provinces to defeat insurgent networks and facilitate economic development in the region. During the operation, TF *Chosin*'s Headquarters and Headquarters Company secured the entirety of the Pech River Road and other forces began pushing into many of the Pech's capillary valleys, including the Waygal just west of the Watapur and the Korengal and Shuryak valleys that flowed into the Pech from the south. Prior to MOUNTAIN LION, travel from Asadabad to Nangalam took hours because of the poor condition of the Pech River Road and the insurgent and IED threats. Securing the road meant that American forces could transit the valley much more rapidly and eventually work began to pave the road.⁶

Lieutenant Colonel Cavoli saw an opportunity that MOUNTAIN LION had made possible. In previous operations, the insurgent operations in the area resumed once Coalition forces returned to their bases thus limiting the effectiveness of any attempt to secure areas that had been cleared of insurgents. Cavoli now decided to stay in those areas that constituted population centers. The Soldiers from TF *Chosin* who ventured into the Pech during MOUNTAIN LION reported that the local residents responded quite favorably to their presence. Based on these reactions, Cavoli's unit constructed a series of small outposts along the river road to maintain a more permanent presence. From these positions, the battalion hoped to spread Coalition influence into the capillary valleys and eventually to the more isolated villages found on the ridgelines above the valley floors.⁷

As part of this flurry of activity, the battalion's leadership decided to build an outpost at or near the head of the Watapur Valley. Based on the positive contacts that US forces had with the people of Semitan, a small village just to the west of the mouth the Watapur Valley along the north bank of the Pech River, Charlie Company constructed Vehicle Patrol Base (VPB) Florida on vacant land immediately outside the village. The VPB lay next to the Pech River Road or ROUTE (RTE) RHODE ISLAND as Coalition forces called it and allowed the troops to interact freely with local residents without significantly disrupting their daily routines. From the new base, the Soldiers conducted multi-day patrols during which they visited nearby villages, met with the local elders, and then moved on to the next village only returning to their small bases for resupply.⁸

During the late spring and early summer, the commander of Charlie Company, Captain Robert Stanton, received intelligence on enemy activity in the Watapur Valley and began tracking the flow of foreign fighters into

the valley's northern end. The need to secure RTE RHODE ISLAND and the wide dispersion of the battalion's assets, however, meant that the Watapur remained a relatively low priority for Stanton. Only once, in early July 2006, did TF *Chosin* conduct a major operation into the valley region. The battalion commander sent two platoons, one from Stanton's company and the other from Alpha Company (about 80 Soldiers), into the Watapur in an attempt to interdict the movement of insurgents across the ridgelines. Alpha Company's 3d Platoon led by First Lieutenant Raymond McPadden moved onto the high ground above Tsangar while Captain Stanton led a platoon from Charlie Company from VPB Combat Main through Kur Bagh towards Shuban Sar peak to the northwest. Once on Shuban Sar, Stanton's men secured a landing zone to allow the battalion's scout platoon to land via helicopter and then advance northward along suspected insurgent trails.⁹

Stanton's platoon met no major enemy resistance during their portion of the mission. Meanwhile, McPadden's platoon near Tsangar was not so lucky. On 5 July, the third day of the operation, the platoon established a patrol base approximately 500 meters below the top of the ridgeline and approximately a kilometer above Tsangar. However, the site chosen included some unobservable areas between fighting positions and an unarmed villager wandered through the patrol base virtually undetected. Soon afterwards, an insurgent force hiding in the brush around the base attacked the American platoon. McPadden's force called in field artillery and mortars but there was no reserve available to provide reinforcements on the ground. The 3d Platoon killed at least six insurgents but the long firefight and the large number of men wounded in the fight, left the unit unable to pursue the enemy force. Only on 10 July, five days after the firefight, did an Afghan Army platoon relieve McPadden's force allowing his men to return to their normal outpost in the Korengal Valley. The remnants of the insurgent element, however, continued westward and attacked the battalion's scout platoon in the mountains north of Shuban Sar, bringing the operation to a close.¹⁰

TF *Rock* into the Valleys, 2007-2008

Initially slated for a 12 month long deployment to Afghanistan, the 1-32 IN had its tour of duty extended and remained in place until relieved in May 2007 by 2d Battalion, 503d Infantry (2-503 IN) which was nicknamed TF *Rock*. Beginning with this deployment cycle, the number of American Soldiers in Afghanistan increased and forces realigned within the country. As a result, where TF *Chosin*'s AO had covered parts of four provinces, TF *Rock* only deployed to Kunar and parts of Nuristan. Lieutenant Colonel

William Ostlund, the battalion commander, hoped to engage insurgents deep in the Pech's capillary valleys including the Watapur in order to improve security along the Pech River Road. Within TF *Rock*'s AO, part of Captain Louis Frketic's Alpha Company occupied VPB Florida and several other outposts along the road. Almost immediately upon his unit's arrival, Frketic implemented Ostlund's strategy in the Watapur area by sending reconnaissance patrols up the valley and meeting with local village elders as far north as Qatar Kala. These initial patrols allowed Frketic to gain a greater understanding of the valley's political and social dynamics in order to better execute the battalion campaign plan.¹¹

In late June, Frketic began pushing elements of his company farther up the Watapur. On 27 June, Alpha Company's 3d Platoon reached Qowru approximately one kilometer north of Qatar Kala. After patrolling the village, the Soldiers began returning southward to exit the valley when they made contact with a group of insurgents. The ensuing firefight was short but it served as a catalyst for further American action in the Watapur. Frketic had received warnings from his predecessor, Stanton, about the hostility of Tsangar's residents. Intelligence gathered during the early months of the 2-503 IN's deployment indicated that the insurgents operated a training camp in that village and others in the valley. This training camp consisted of a number of compounds that reportedly housed both foreign fighters and Afghan insurgents as they organized and learned a variety of techniques. Frketic noted that the camps provided a "summer internship" whereby new insurgent fighters could train, receive their first taste of combat by engaging US forces in the Watapur, and then return to their home areas prepared to continue the fight against the Coalition. Based on the attack in Qowru and the intelligence on Tsangar, Frketic received approval from his battalion commander to mount Operation ABLE ATTACK. Scheduled for 4-5 July 2007, the operation called for an air assault into Tsangar to clear the village in order to eliminate the training camp.¹²

On 3 July, the day prior to ABLE ATTACK, an ad hoc platoon-sized element drawn from across Alpha Company attended a meeting with local Afghans in Qowru, this time with Captain Frketic leading. Yet again, as the Soldiers left the village, insurgents fired at the Americans. This second encounter was far more intense than the first firefight. An estimated 30-40 enemy fighters had moved down the ridgelines from Tsangar to fire upon the Americans with small arms, machine guns, and rocket propelled grenades (RPGs). The paratrooper platoon quickly regained the upper hand and forced the insurgents to withdraw but the incident only reinforced the need to clear Tsangar.¹³

The following night, Alpha Company's 1st and 3d Platoons, each partnered with Afghan Army platoons, air-assaulted into positions near Tsangar. The 1st Platoon and its Afghan partners landed at Helicopter Landing Zone (HLZ) Proposed, located south and west of Tsangar and established a blocking position. Meanwhile Frketic, his 3d Platoon, and an Afghan platoon landed at HLZ Chiefs, east of Tsangar, intending to clear the village and push any suspected insurgents towards 1st Platoon's blocking position. Soon after landing, the Afghan platoon made contact with insurgents at the presumed training campsite and a firefight ensued. The Afghan unit suffered two wounded, one of which was First Lieutenant Jeff Colunga, leader of their US Marine Corps Embedded Training Team (ETT). They successfully fought through the insurgent fire, however, and then destroyed the camp. The next morning, the 3d Platoon pushed through the steeply terraced terrain to clear the village and linked up with the 1st Platoon at their blocking position.¹⁴

After the rendezvous at the blocking position, the 1st Platoon began searching nearby caves for hidden caches when the entire combined force began receiving heavy fire from all directions. An enemy force estimated at more than 100 fighters had occupied positions surrounding the Americans and the Afghan National Army platoons and a long firefight ensued. The paratroopers suffered several casualties, including Private First Class Christopher Honaker and Specialist Joseph Miracle who were killed. Despite the fierce enemy fire, Alpha Company held its own, and eventually, a torrent of 155-mm artillery rounds, 60-mm mortar rounds, 500-lb. bombs, missile strikes from Predator Unmanned Aerial Vehicles (UAVs), and a pass by an orbiting Air Force AC-130 gunship stopped the enemy attack. Alpha Company remained in their positions throughout 6 July and exfiltrated from HLZ Proposed back to Combat Outpost (COP) Able Main late that night.¹⁵

Over the long term, ABLE ATTACK had a decidedly mixed effect on the security situation in the Watapur Valley. The number of valley residents providing information on insurgent activities to Coalition forces significantly increased and led to a greater understanding of the nature of enemy activity in the area. Unfortunately, the firefight also strengthened the enemy's resolve in the face of what they viewed as an insidious American threat. Insurgent forces had suffered heavy losses but this did not prevent other local or foreign fighters from taking up arms against the Coalition. In fact, Frketic noted that nearly all future patrols north of Qatar Kala met with some enemy resistance.¹⁶ The operation was the largest in the Watapur since the 2/3 Marines' Operation PIL in 2005 and revealed an enemy willing and able to resist Alpha Company's moves into the valley.

Undeterred by the increased hostility shown by many locals after ABLE ATTACK, Captain Frketic continued to operate in the valley. Lieutenant Colonel Ostlund had built his campaign plan based on that of TF *Chosin* but he adjusted his overall array of forces in the area of operation. First, he wanted to consolidate the string of small outposts in the Pech. During this consolidation, Ostlund desired to move VPB Florida, the main Coalition outpost in the area, closer to more populated parts of the Watapur District in order to facilitate population-centric counterinsurgency operations. Even by the standards of the region, Semitan was an extremely small village, incapable of influencing the region. Tactically, VPB Florida's location in the shadow of the ridgeline on the west side of the valley left it exposed to direct fire from insurgents. Runoff from rainfall also streamed down the ridgeline and frequently inundated the small base, much to the discomfort of the Coalition forces stationed there.¹⁷

Moving the American base in the Watapur farther to the east could solve these problems but the question became where to place the outpost to achieve the maximum effect. Ostlund briefly considered establishing an outpost in the northern reaches of the Watapur but experience with the Korengal Outpost and COPs Bella and Ranch House deep in the nearby Waygal Valley demonstrated that such an outpost would require air assets to remain supplied. More worrying was the fact that an outpost in the northern Watapur would not guarantee that relationships with the valley's residents actually improved; the Korengal had remained restive even after more than a year of close contact with American forces and the population of the Waygal remained neutral at best. Ostlund set aside this option and chose to build a new outpost at a site scouted by Frketic just outside the village of Shamir Kowt at the mouth of the Watapur that promised to remedy VPB Florida's problems. First, the location at Shamir Kowt would avoid the problems caused by flooding and, by virtue of the increased distance from the ridgelines, made the new site more secure. Second, Shamir Kowt's bazaar was the economic hub for the entire Watapur District and because it attracted customers from miles around, the new location would allow the Coalition to observe and influence Watapur Valley residents more easily.¹⁸

Captain Frketic initially attempted to secure permission and a formal lease from Shamir Kowt's elders to build the new base. The Americans hired surveyors from a local engineering firm to determine a suitable site and they also held several meetings in the village to resolve local land conflicts so that construction could begin. The elders of Shamir Kowt and the district government, however, mired the proposal in red tape and

it soon appeared unlikely that any local entity would formally grant the Americans a lease. Wishing to wait no further, Frketic moved elements of Alpha Company into the new site in late July and seized the land. While seemingly contradicting Alpha Company's goal of better connecting with the local population, this move ultimately benefitted both the Coalition and the people of Shamir Kowt. The survey process and the resolution of the land disputes gave the Americans a much deeper understanding of the social, political, and financial ties between individuals and the different tribal clans who inhabited the Watapur Valley. Seizing the land also provided political cover for the elders of Shamir Kowt who could now reap the rewards of increased security without having to give official sanction to a Coalition presence in their village.¹⁹

The new outpost, named COP Honaker-Miracle, began with a triple-strand concertina wire perimeter in late July. Over the next several months, heavy construction equipment arrived and erected permanent structures on the site. Its large size of approximately 24,000 square meters included a helicopter landing zone capable of accommodating CH-47 Chinook helicopters and the space to house up to a reinforced battalion of US and Afghan Soldiers. Over time, the COP accommodated two 155-mm howitzers, increasing the amount of supporting fires available to Coalition forces operating in the vicinity. Concurrent with the COP's construction and in an effort to facilitate closer ties between security forces and the local government, the Americans built a new district center just outside the COP to replace the older makeshift structure previously in use.²⁰

As the construction of COP Honaker-Miracle progressed, the men of Alpha Company participated in another major operation into the Watapur named SNAKETOOOTH. Conducted in late September, the intent of SNAKETOOOTH, just as with ABLE ATTACK, was to cordon and search Tsangar. The operation involved SF units air-assaulting into positions on the ridgeline above Tsangar to clear the village while elements from Alpha Company occupied a blocking position in Qowru. The bulk of enemy resistance, however, came not against the units around Tsangar but against a small force occupying a position on the west side of the Watapur Valley. This platoon-sized force under the command of First Lieutenant Gregory Ambrosia, Alpha Company's executive officer, came under heavy fire on the morning of 25 September. A pitched battle ensued that day as the insurgents closed to within hand grenade range of the American position. Ambrosia and his paratroopers repulsed the attack and used smoke to mark locations for fires and gun-runs by helicopter gunships that successfully drove off the insurgent force.²¹

Following Operation SNAKETOOOTH, Alpha Company continued to conduct routine patrols in the valley and met with village elders. In the spring of 2008, Captain Frketic transferred command to Captain David Nelson who continued to engage local Afghan leaders. Nelson specifically intended to gain Afghan support for the planned conversion of an abandoned building between Qatar Kala and Qowru on the valley floor into a clinic capable of providing regular medical care and to support periodic Medical Civic Action Program (MEDCAP) missions by US units. The clinic promised to bring the benefits of development deep into the Watapur and convince skeptical locals of the need for a stronger Afghan government presence. After one meeting about the clinic in a Watapur village, insurgents fired on Nelson and his 2d Platoon as they departed. Soon afterwards, Nelson entered the village of Shahid to meet with another set of local leaders bringing a mounted force including the 2d and 3d Platoons, an Afghan Army company, and a Route Clearance Package (RCP), an engineer platoon equipped with specially outfitted vehicles and other equipment tasked with finding and neutralizing IEDs. Nelson had coordinated fire support from mortars, artillery, and Apache gunships in case of another ambush. After the meeting, Nelson's force was met by heavy fire from multiple directions. A five hour long battle ensued that saw Alpha Company bring all of its firepower to bear on the insurgents. More than 20 insurgent fighters died in this engagement before the enemy force withdrew into the mountains.²²

The insurgents' willingness to stand and fight was likely driven, at least in part, by their belief that the clinic posed a threat to their ability to control the northern end of the valley. They thus opposed Nelson's efforts to promote the clinic among village elders. TF *Rock* however was intent on gaining some influence over the Watapur's population. Accordingly, Able Company escorted the Kunar Provincial Reconstruction Team (PRT) – a combined civil/military unit engaged in economic development missions – north of Qatar Kala to a meeting to discuss the clinic and distribute humanitarian aid. As before, insurgents fired on the Coalition force as it left the Watapur. Nelson, learning from the two prior incidents, had placed a scout sniper team onto a ridgeline for additional cover and held his AH-64 Apache gunships out of auditory range of the insurgents. The aggressive enemy tried to suppress Alpha Company's fire while an insurgent maneuver element attempted to move down and block the road. The scout sniper team, however, forced these insurgents to withdraw. Eventually, the enemy's enthusiasm for the fight waned and they broke contact.²³

Captain Nelson now sought to use the insurgent's aggressiveness against them with a fourth foray into the northern Watapur. On 24 June 2008, 1st and 3d Platoons air-assaulted into the eastern and western sides of the valley respectively, with signals intelligence (SIGINT) teams to pinpoint insurgent locations. Nelson led his 2d Platoon and Afghan Army platoon north of Qatar Kala bringing earth-filled HESCO barriers and told local elders that he intended to build a COP in the valley. The news spread like wildfire and soon the SIGINT equipment began intercepting insurgent communications that indicated that they intended to prevent the Americans from establishing a permanent combat presence in the valley. Over the next 36 hours, an enemy force estimated at a strength of 20 separate squads converged on the Watapur only to encounter massed indirect fires and close air support. The insurgents suffered heavy casualties before withdrawing from the field. Nelson hoped that the battle would disrupt the insurgents long enough for TF *Rock*'s replacements, due to arrive the following month, to establish in the Watapur.²⁴

Constrained Counterinsurgency Efforts in the Watapur Valley, 2008-2010

The two units that deployed to the Pech between mid-2008 and 2010 reduced their emphasis on the Watapur Valley in order to focus on the virulent insurgency that had erupted in the nearby Korengal Valley. In July 2008, TF *Rock* was replaced by the 1st Battalion, 26th Infantry Regiment (1-26 IN), nicknamed TF *Blue Spader*. The new unit's Alpha Company, commanded by Captain Nicholas Bilotta, assumed responsibility for Watapur District and part of the Pech District along RTE RHODE ISLAND. When Bilotta first arrived in Afghanistan, he initially continued Nelson's aggressive operations in the Watapur. The company regularly patrolled the valley and routinely visited Qatar Kala and Qowru. The RCPs typically led these mounted patrols up the Watapur's main road, but in the year that Bilotta's Company spent in the valley, they never found any IEDs. These patrols, however, frequently made contact with the enemy, actions that would lead to Bilotta's Soldiers calling in indirect fires to suppress insurgent elements.²⁵

Plans for a company-sized operation to clear Tsangar or Gambir never materialized, eclipsed by other priorities and a lack of available support assets. Instead, the largest operation in the Watapur during TF *Blue Spader*'s deployment was conducted in November 2008 by US Special Forces and their partner Afghan Army units. While Bilotta's company occupied blocking positions at the valley floor, SF and Afghan Army forces cleared Tsangar. Unfortunately poor weather limited air support

(especially from helicopter gunships) and Alpha Company never made contact with the enemy.²⁶

Within the *Blue Spaders*' AO, the battalion commander, Lieutenant Colonel Brett Jenkinson, called for full spectrum operations that balanced offensive, defensive, and stability operations in an effort to tie down insurgents in Kunar Province while garnering popular support from the population.²⁷ In the Watapur by late 2008, Bilotta began prioritizing stability missions to quell discontent in the valley. While routine and aggressive patrolling had visibly displayed the American presence in the area and led to the deaths of many insurgents, the patrols had failed to decrease the enemy presence or win over the residents. Bilotta compared the seemingly incessant stream of fighters in the Watapur to ants flowing out of an anthill. He reasoned that patrolling had distracted him and his men from engaging with the local government and the civilian population of the Watapur. Therefore by middle of the deployment in winter 2008/2009, Alpha Company shifted towards nonlethal operations and aggressively expanded its outreach towards the locals. By better addressing the population's needs, Bilotta believed that he could build support for the legitimate Afghan Government.

Alpha Company exhibited this change of emphasis in several ways. First, Bilotta moved the company headquarters from COP Able Main to Honaker-Miracle so that he could forge better ties with the population and the local government. This shift also demonstrated American recognition that the Watapur Valley was critical to securing the Pech River Valley. Second, Alpha Company participated in a number of development projects and initiatives designed to generate support for the Coalition and Afghanistan's government. These included completing the clinic between Qatar Kala and Qowru. Bilotta benefitted from the support that TF *Rock* had generated for the project but the insurgents responded by destroying the clinic after it was built. Alpha Company participated in a program called "Kicks for Kids in Kunar" which distributed thousands of pairs of shoes to local children. Other projects helped bring solar and hydro power to Qatar Kala. Perhaps the most popular of these efforts was Captain Bilotta's procurement of a large supply of cement for local projects proposed by community leaders.²⁸

In June 2009, 2d Battalion, 12th Infantry Regiment (2-12 IN) also known as Task Force *Lethal Warrior*, deployed to northeast Afghanistan to replace TF *Blue Spader*. Charlie Company, 2-12 IN arrived in the Watapur to relieve 1-26 IN's Alpha Company. As with its predecessors, TF *Lethal Warrior* focused its attention on the Korengal culminating in

the closing of the Korengal Outpost (KOP) the following spring. During the relief process in the Watapur Valley, the new company commander, Captain Shaun Conlin, accompanied Captain Bilotta, his friend and classmate from the United States Military Academy at West Point, to meet with local elders in Qowru. The pair stopped in Qatar Kala so that Bilotta could introduce Conlin to the elders there, but as they walked through the village, the Americans noticed that the local civilians had begun to flee the village en masse, an indicator of an imminent attack. The Soldiers managed to take up fighting positions on the outskirts of the village before the insurgent assault began. The brazenness of the enemy attack surprised the Americans and the ensuing firefight lasted nearly six hours before the surviving enemy fighters withdrew back up the ridgelines.²⁹ Bilotta later recalled telling Conlin after their return to COP Honaker-Miracle, “Hey, welcome to the Watapur. This isn’t how it is, you know.”³⁰

While the enemy never proved quite so bold in future months, the attack Conlin witnessed in Qatar Kala on his first day set the tone for much of Charlie Company’s deployment. Most of the combat endured by the company took place in locations in the southern end of the Watapur Valley. Soon after the start of the 2-12 IN’s deployment, Conlin sent troops to Qatar Kala, this time led by elements from their partner Afghan Army unit. At the start of the return trip, an insurgent marksman began firing at the convoy. The sniper distracted the Americans and Afghans long enough to allow an insurgent force to maneuver into an attack position and open fire. The Coalition force soon drove the insurgents off. This attack in concert with the earlier firefight in the town demonstrated to Conlin how dangerous the valley remained.³¹

Later patrols moved up the sides of the Watapur’s steep ridgelines to destroy insurgent positions located on the high ground. Conlin learned of an insurgent presence in the hillside village of Maidon and began dispatching regular patrols to the vicinity. The first operation in Maidon occurred in late July 2009 when Soldiers from Conlin’s 3d Platoon hiked to the top of Pund Sar Peak southwest of Tows Kala to observe the village. Insurgents spotted the force and surrounded it, closing to within a few dozen meters before opening fire. They wounded several Soldiers, prompting Conlin to commit much of the rest of his company and request reinforcements from a Delta Company platoon to neutralize the insurgent force.³²

In spite of stiff enemy resistance, Conlin continued to send regular patrols into the valley in late 2009. These patrols focused primarily on Qatar Kala. Further up the ridgelines, Charlie Company troops conducted a small air assault on Maidon to destroy a suspected recoilless rifle position.

A later operation searched an area between Tows Kala and Tsangar for a suspected enemy mortar location. During these actions, the enemy stealthily observed the American movements and struck when the terrain gave them the best chance of success. To disrupt the persistent insurgent threat, Conlin proposed executing a battalion-sized operation, but the main effort of 2-12 IN was in the Korengal Valley.³³

During the early months of 2010, Conlin's unit shifted its attention to the western end of its area of operation by conducting operations near Kur Bagh, Dand, and Khaki Bandy to the west of the Watapur along the Pech River Road. Only at the end of the deployment did Charlie Company again conduct operations in the Watapur itself. Conlin's men located insurgents moving from Tsangar to attack traffic along the Pech River Road between Asadabad and Shamir Kowt, and an unmanned aerial vehicle (UAV) strike destroyed the enemy force. Just prior to the end of their tour of duty, Charlie Company conducted two more patrols to Maidon that made contact with some insurgents and necessitated the use of Close Air Support (CAS) and helicopter gunships to destroy suspected enemy positions.³⁴

Captain Conlin and Charlie Company had spent significant time conducting non-lethal operations as well as patrols but local resistance to these outreach efforts had grown. Like his predecessors, Conlin had called for meetings to forge closer ties between village elders and the Coalition forces. Whereas elders from Gambir, Tsangar, and other notorious trouble spots had attended past meetings, they now refused to travel to the southern end of the Watapur to meet with other elders or the Americans. Plans to carry out Veterinary Civil Action Program (VETCAP) missions to care for local animals, implement agriculture programs, and conduct flood control construction all met with resistance because the locals feared insurgent reprisals. Late in Charlie Company's tour of duty, the unit began receiving Commander's Emergency Response Program (CERP) funds that they quickly used to start worthy projects. Will Hall, a civilian from the US Agency for International Development (USAID) located at the Watapur District Center, worked with local elders and helped them shape their project proposals to make them more likely to receive funds. Only by ceding control of these projects to these elders did Conlin spot any noticeable increase in support for the Coalition.³⁵

The endemic corruption in Afghanistan stymied several initiatives designed to improve the quality of life for the people of the Watapur District. For instance, one local development project installed solar lights in Qatar Kala. The new lights met with universal praise from the

locals but the technology soon fell victim to persistent corruption and theft. After installation, thieves immediately tore down the lights and sold off the valuable parts for profit. Another project started by TF *Rock* and continued by Captain Conlin was the delivery of desks and other furniture to schoolhouses in Qatar Kala and Qowru. The program required schoolmasters to travel to the district center to pick up the furniture because they could find no contractor willing to do it. Soon after the desks arrived, however, someone stole them, forcing the schools to close. One empty schoolhouse would eventually function as an impromptu hotel for insurgent fighters passing through the Watapur.³⁶

Operation BULLDOG BITE, 2010

In 2010, the 1st Battalion, 327th Infantry Regiment (1-327 IN) or TF *Bulldog*, relieved 2-12 IN. Captain Robert Reynolds' Alpha Company occupied COP Honaker-Miracle and assumed responsibility for the Watapur District. The first several months of the company's rotation focused on Operation CROP DIVERSIFICATION, an attempt to improve the agricultural productivity of the region. Alpha Company participated in this effort along the Pech River Road and persuaded local farmers to alter their crop selections. As the project continued, Alpha Company Soldiers patrolled in the Watapur Valley as far north as Qatar Kala but generally maintained a low profile there and gathered intelligence on the insurgent networks in the area. The one exception came that summer when elements from the company searched for weapons caches near Pund Sar Peak to prevent insurgents from firing mortars at Honaker-Miracle. The search failed to uncover anything significant but it reinforced TF *Bulldog*'s belief that securing the Watapur required more attention and resources.³⁷

TF *Bulldog*'s early emphasis on nonlethal operations continued through summer 2010 but circumstances soon changed, allowing the battalion to begin planning a series of combat operations later in the year. In June, *Bulldog*'s sister battalion, 2-327 IN or TF *No Slack*, had conducted Operation STRONG EAGLE in Marawara District to the east, tying up air support and other key assets for several weeks and restricting operations in the Pech. In September, Afghanistan's parliamentary elections required TF *Bulldog* and other US units to focus all their resources on securing polling sites and government centers. After the elections, TF *Bulldog*'s parent brigade headquarters ceded operational control for Laghman Province to another brigade, freeing up a number of brigade-level assets. The situation allowed TF *Bulldog* to become the brigade's main effort during the fall months and the battalion hoped to maximize the opportunity afforded them.³⁸

Battalion Commander Lieutenant Colonel Joseph Ryan and his staff planned an ambitious operation, BULLDOG BITE, which entailed large clearing operations in different parts of the Pech Valley. Beginning in October, phase one of BULLDOG BITE cleared the Korengal and Shuryak valleys southwest of the Watapur followed by a second phase of clearing operations in the Chapa Dara District at the western end of the Pech Valley. The actions proved successful in reducing the threat posed by these trouble spots. However, they also mobilized and attracted insurgents throughout the region by the time the third phase of the operation began. This part of BULLDOG BITE was focused on the Watapur Valley and would be the largest operation by an Army unit in the valley since ABLE ATTACK in 2007.³⁹

For this phase, Captain Reynolds' Alpha Company became the battalion's decisive effort. The operation called for the company to move by helicopter into positions east of Tsangar to clear the village of insurgent activity. Once through Tsangar, Alpha Company would then advance down the ridgeline to Qowru and then south to Qatar Kala. Elements from TF *Bulldog*'s Bravo, Charlie, and Delta companies would assume blocking positions in the valley below Tsangar to intercept any fighters that attempted to flee Alpha Company's movements. In addition to the rifle companies, SOF elements would operate at the north end of the valley. An Afghan commando battalion, advised by an American ODA, planned to clear Katar Darya, and a special operations task force that included several US Army Ranger units would clear Gambir.⁴⁰

Reynolds, his headquarters element, and his 1st and 3d Platoons landed at HLZ Chiefs to the northeast of Tsangar on the morning of 12 November. Delta Company's 3d Platoon with its Afghan National Army (ANA) partners occupied an overwatch position to the north of the village. The 1st Platoon's clearance of Tsangar began at daylight and met with no enemy resistance. Meanwhile, however, multiple groups of enemy fighters attacked the overwatch position from the north. Unfortunately, the overwatch element was not on the highest ground in the immediate vicinity and the enemy exploited this weakness. The massive firepower advantage of the Coalition forces saved the position as OH-58D Kiowa Warrior helicopters and other aviation assets suppressed the insurgent fire. The US suffered one fatality, Specialist Shannon Chihuahua, and the Afghan Army unit had two additional soldiers killed in action. Enemy fire wounded 10 other US Soldiers in their attack, requiring multiple MEDEVAC flights.⁴¹

As the operation proceeded near Tsangar, a number of insurgents located south of COP Honaker-Miracle began directing machinegun fire

onto the outpost. The timing was anything but a coincidence and indicated the insurgents hoped to limit the ability of forces in the COP to reinforce or otherwise support operations near Tsangar. At one point, the commander of 1st BCT, 101st Airborne Division, Colonel Stephen Townsend, visited Honaker-Miracle to observe the operation. When a Blackhawk helicopter attempted to land to pick Townsend up and return him to the BCT main command post, the insurgents drove it away with heavy fire, effectively stranding Townsend at the COP for several hours⁴²

Reynolds and his two platoons linked up with the beleaguered Delta platoon on the evening of 12 November. After nightfall, the battalion took advantage of the darkness to provide reinforcements. With much of the Delta Company platoon rendered combat ineffective during the afternoon firefight, Lieutenant Colonel Ryan moved Reynolds' 2d Platoon from its base to the west at COP Able Main to Tsangar. Reynolds now had all three of his platoons on hand plus the remnants of the Delta platoon. With this augmented force, Reynolds moved north to Katar Darya on 13 November to pursue the remnants of the insurgent force encountered the previous day. Ryan believed that an aggressive movement to the north would allow his men to finish off the enemy but he later second guessed this decision and recognized that he may have ceded the initiative to an enemy lying in wait for an American response.⁴³

Alpha Company began its movement northward on the morning of 13 November but, well short of reaching Katar Darya, it came under attack by enemy fighters. Yet again, the insurgents proved skillful and especially tenacious foes. They fired on the Alpha Company force from higher ground to the east and only after several CAS strikes did the insurgents withdraw. In this action, accompanying Afghan Army units sustained three KIAs, and several American Soldiers were wounded and required evacuation. The northward advance halted for the night and the combined force prepared to resume its movement in the morning.⁴⁴

The next morning, Alpha Company went north and discovered evidence of an insurgent training camp in the valley, finding a newly built structure with a sturdy metal roof directly along the path to Katar Darya. Inside the building, the troops found sleeping bags and a substantial stockpile of ammunition. Captain Reynolds called in a CAS strike that completely destroyed the site as the company continued its advance.⁴⁵

When Alpha Company drew closer to Katar Darya, the captain dispatched an element to reconnoiter the village and sent his 3d Platoon to high ground between two creek beds approximately 250 meters to the northeast to provide overwatch for both his reconnaissance force and his main element. Just as Reynolds began to confer with the leaders of 1st

and 2d Platoons to plan their clearance of the village, multiple groups of fighters opened fire on both the main element and the 3d Platoon's overwatch element. The firefight began suddenly as machinegun and RPG rounds struck the American positions. The main element found shelter in a small *qalat* (a small adobe compound common to Afghanistan) but the 3d Platoon, out in the open, took the brunt of the enemy fire. During the daylong engagement that only ceased when the light faded, four members of the 3d Platoon were killed and seven wounded. The 1st and 2d platoons did not emerge unscathed, losing one KIA. Reynolds' force remained outside the village through the night of 14 November, the enemy having extracted a heavy toll from Alpha Company.⁴⁶

Alpha Company's heavy firefight made Lieutenant Colonel Ryan issue new orders to his other companies moving up the valley floor, and on the next day, the bulk of TF *Bulldog* pushed up the valley to Shahid to the west of Alpha Company's location and established blocking positions. To the north, a Ranger unit successfully cleared Gambir that day, sustaining one Ranger fatality in the operation. Afghan commandos cleared Sero Kalay without incident and the beleaguered Alpha Company successfully pushed through Katar Darya. The Coalition forces left the Watapur Valley by the end of the day, bringing that phase of BULLDOG BITE to a close. An estimated 50 insurgents had been killed in the operation. In the days ahead, BULLDOG BITE concluded as other forces from TF *Bulldog* cleared the area near Kur Bagh, encountering no enemy resistance.⁴⁷

In the months following BULLDOG BITE, Alpha Company continued to patrol the southern end of the valley but the unit did not conduct another major operation in the Watapur Valley. In early 2011, larger changes in the Coalition campaign in the Pech Valley began to affect the American effort in the Watapur. In February, Coalition leaders decided to turn over military responsibility for the entire Pech Valley west of the Watapur to the Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF), and TF *Bulldog* conducted Operation BULLDOG BLITZ to facilitate the Afghan assumption of the security mission. This changeover included the transfer of the longtime American manned bases: FOB Blessing, COP Michigan, and COP Able Main to Afghan units. As a result, COP Honaker-Miracle became the western-most American outpost during the last few months of TF *Bulldog*'s tour of duty. The decision pleased Lieutenant Colonel Ryan, who, after operating in the region for nine months, viewed the Pech area as a strategic dead end and downplayed the region's importance in facilitating the movement of insurgents into the Afghan interior.⁴⁸

The central assumption underlying the Coalition decision to withdraw from the Pech was that the ANSF had reached a sufficient level of training and operational efficiency to shoulder the security burden in the area and such a move would serve as a model for other ANSF units. The ANSF units in the western Pech, however, quickly proved incapable of providing security and the situation rapidly deteriorated. The Afghan Army battalion at Nangalam Base, the new name for Camp Blessing, bore the brunt of these problems and, in mid-April, the battalion commander deserted his unit, creating a leadership vacuum. The battalion's S2 Intelligence Officer took command at Nangalam but the unit was unable to counter a strengthened insurgency. Soon the insurgents were moving freely in the western Pech and brought COP Honaker-Miracle under mortar fire for the first time since the conclusion of BULLDOG BITE. Thus, by the end of 1-327 IN's tour in Afghanistan in April 2011, the Pech Valley had become much more dangerous and any progress made by Coalition forces in previous years began eroding.⁴⁹

Conclusion

As of spring 2011, several clear patterns began to emerge regarding the American presence in the Watapur Valley. First, every American unit responsible for the area since 2005 believed the valley sat along a "rat line" that allowed insurgent forces to move from Pakistan through the Pech on their way into the heart of Afghanistan around Kabul. Intelligence reports consistently indicated that Gambir and Tsangar housed insurgent training camps. While every unit in the valley generally took an approach that was based on COIN principles, each battalion employed a different mix of lethal and nonlethal operations. The Marines, TF *Rock*, and TF *Bulldog* all mounted company- or battalion-size operations in the Watapur. TF *Rock* in particular adopted the approach that fighting insurgents deep in the capillary valleys prevented the enemy from taking the fight to the Pech River Road where economic progress was underway. By contrast, TF *Chosin*, TF *Blue Spaders*, and TF *Lethal Warrior* conducted smaller and less frequent operations against the insurgents while attempting to win support of the population through nonlethal operations. TF *Chosin* had been responsible for a sprawling area of operation consisting of four provinces. The units that followed TF *Chosin*, while less spread out, directed most of their resources toward the Korengal and Pech Valleys. In comparison, the Watapur Valley received little attention.

The accounts and experiences of the Americans stationed in the Watapur from 2005 into 2011 vary in a number of ways but four characteristics remained constant throughout the deployments. First and perhaps most important was the attitude among the valley's population

toward development and security initiatives. Troops at COP Honaker-Miracle rarely faced a serious insurgent threat and those who ventured out on patrols into the valley found the population generally receptive to Coalition initiatives, at least as far as north Qatar Kala. Beyond Qatar Kala, however, the level of control and security fell off dramatically. Some units found movement safe as far north as Qowru but only TF *Rock's* Able Company, under Captain Frketic, reported making regular nighttime patrols to Shahid at the northern end of the valley. American units found virtually no support for the Afghan government in the villages on the Watapur's eastern ridgeline. In particular, the villagers of Gambir and Tsangar consistently showed hostility towards any attempt to neutralize the insurgent threat.

The second enduring characteristic was the presence of a formidable foe in the valley which was aggressive and tactically proficient, especially in the use of terrain. The Safi Pashtuns and Nuristanis in the area had a long history of resistance to outsiders. Afghanistan had been in a near constant state of civil war since 1979 and many Afghans knew nothing but conflict. Afghan males had taken up arms against each other, the Soviet Army, and the Coalition's western forces, exposing them to a wide variety of tactics, techniques, and procedures. In this environment, young men could acquire political and social status, valuable commodities in an area with few economic opportunities, by proving themselves on the battlefield. This mixture of motive, opportunity, and experience made for an enemy willing to endure heavy losses but also possessing extensive firsthand knowledge of modern small unit operations.

The third characteristic was the commonality of key elements in many of the firefights between Coalition and insurgent forces in the Watapur area. US forces possessed advantages in firepower, logistics, and in all but a few rare instances, numbers. Terrain, however, exerted a strong influence, sometimes mitigating superiority in firepower and numbers. The high ridgelines overlooking the valley floor offered the insurgents numerous places from which to fire upon Coalition forces and outposts. The rugged terrain and the fighters' innate knowledge of it allowed them to often avoid the effects of the firepower that US forces could rain down upon them. The terrain even limited nonlethal stability operations as the height and isolation of the eastern villages made it difficult for the residents to see any benefits from the central Afghan government. American forces could rely upon helicopters to penetrate the mountains and occupy tactically dominant terrain but air assets in eastern Afghanistan were relatively scarce and required detailed planning and careful scheduling to ensure their use in large operations.

Finally, the US combat experiences in the Watapur Valley demonstrated that operations in the Afghan campaign, as with all other major military endeavors, were driven by access to resources, most importantly manpower. For several years, Coalition leaders recognized the Pech Valley as a resource priority and the Watapur received some share of that allocation. The number of forces available in the Pech increased between 2005 and 2011 but the US Army and Marines never had enough forces to occupy the northern end of the Watapur permanently. To be sure, the insurgents in the Watapur feared the construction of a COP in the valley, an anxiety that Captain Nelson from TF *Rock*'s Able Company used with devastating effect in June 2008. As long as the Americans could not physically occupy the valley itself, it appeared that only lethal operations on the scale of ABLE ATTACK and BULLDOG BITE offered the Coalition the possibility of controlling the valley.

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Chapter 3

Planning and Opening Moves

In April 2011, Soldiers from the 3d Brigade Combat Team (3d BCT), 25th Infantry Division (TF *Bronco*) assumed responsibility for Nuristan, Nangahar, and Kunar Provinces. The brigade traces its lineage to the pre-World War II Hawaiian Division that in 1941 became part of the 25th Infantry Division. That unit served with distinction during World War II, the Korean War, and Vietnam. The 3d BCT had previously deployed to Afghanistan in 2004 and then to Iraq in 2009. In 2010, the brigade's Soldiers learned they would be returning to Afghanistan for a tour that would begin in 2011.¹

Colonel Richard Kim, the TF *Bronco* commander, was notified that his forces would be operating in northeast Afghanistan. Kim quickly identified the Pech River valley as a priority during the early months of his brigade's deployment. In his assessment, the instability in the region had worsened, facilitating the transit of a greater number of insurgents from the Pakistani border through the Pech valley, and its smaller capillary valleys, and into the vital security zone around Kabul. Task Force *Bronco*, accordingly, needed to re-establish a viable Coalition presence in the Pech and eliminate the security vacuum that had emerged after the transfer of security responsibility and the transfer of previously US manned bases to Afghan National Security Forces in February and March 2011.

The Soldiers of 2d Battalion, 35th Infantry (2-35 IN), known as TF *Cacti*, relieved TF *Bulldog* and assumed responsibility for the southern half of Kunar Province and the Pech Valley. The responsibility for restoring security in the western Pech Valley fell upon this battalion task force commanded by Lieutenant Colonel Colin Tuley. Before mounting a major push into the western Pech. However, TF *Cacti* needed establish conditions to prevent the insurgents from disrupting the American re-entry into the region.² In fact, the first two months of TF *Cacti*'s deployment consisted of gathering and assessing information about the insurgent threat in the western Pech Valley and constructing a campaign plan. Initial intelligence indicated that enemy fighters used the village of Kur Bagh on the north side of the Pech River to mount indirect and direct fire attacks on COP Honaker Miracle, the westernmost US base in the Pech Valley that would serve as the launching point for TF *Cacti*'s operations. To suppress this threat, the unit devised a shaping operation, codenamed Operation HAMMER DOWN, to clear Kur Bagh.³

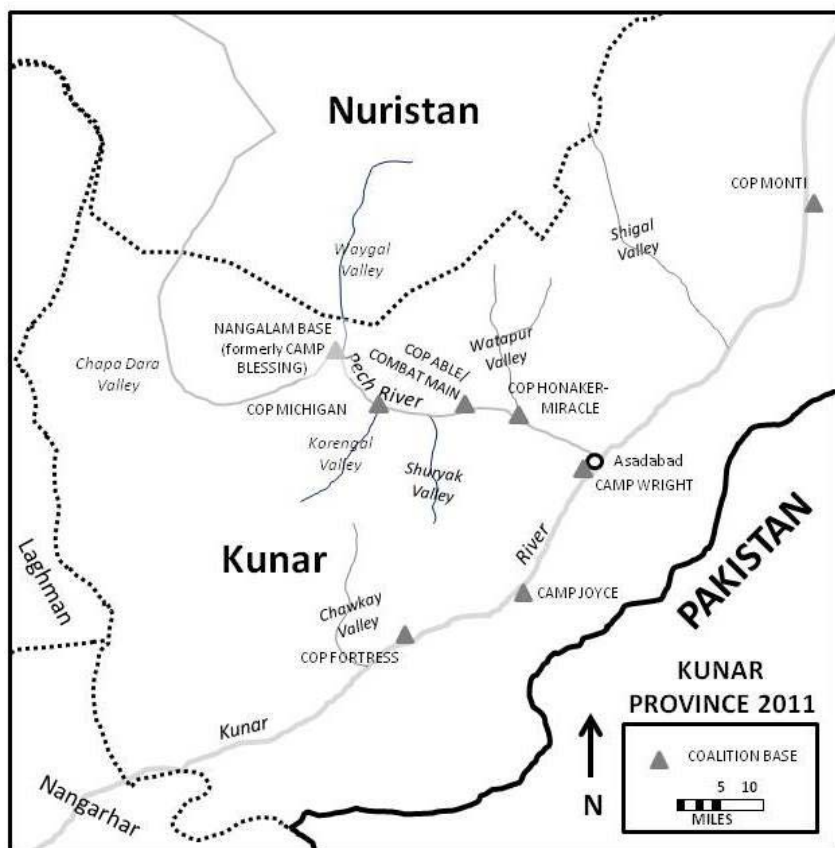


Figure 3: Coalition Bases in Kunar Province, 2011.

Source: author/CSI generated.

As the battalion leaders and staff received more intelligence, however, they began to understand that the Watapur Valley was critical to securing the Pech. The years of conflict had created a transient population in the area and many families migrated seasonally based on the patterns of agriculture and animal husbandry. Additionally, the lack of firm local government control and apathy from those that remained facilitated the movement of insurgent groups through the valley.⁴ Pakistani-based separatist groups that hoped to wrest control of Kashmir Province from India, mostly notably *Lashkar-e-Taiba* (LeT), trained in the Watapur area so frequently that Major Patrick Stich, TF *Bronco*'s S3 Operations Officer, referred to the valley as the "NTC [National Training Center] for LeT."⁵ Because of the presence of foreign fighters and training camps in the Watapur, the battalion decided that an operation to eliminate those threats could help pave the way for their eventual push into the western Pech area. The

primary objectives for HAMMER DOWN accordingly shifted to Gambir and Tsangar. Destroying the suspected training camps at the northern end of the Watapur promised to interdict the flow of insurgents through the valley and deny the enemy the capacity to increase their manpower in the western Pech. Task Force *Cacti* planners, led by the assistant S3 Captain Loren Crowe, considered attempting to clear Gambir, Tsangar, and Kur Bagh simultaneously but dismissed the idea as beyond their resource and manpower capabilities. TF *Cacti* would keep its focus on the Watapur.⁶

The inhospitable terrain in the Watapur meant that the forces clearing these villages would have to be air-assaulted into position. Fortunately, TF *Cacti* had access to the After Action Reports (AARs) of the preceding units and could incorporate the accumulated years of experience into its operational plan. From these experiences, the TF *Cacti* commander and his staff decided to base the concept of HAMMER DOWN on the fundamental tactical principle of seizing and retaining key terrain. Any successful clearance of Tsangar and Gambir, the planners believed, must begin by seizing the high ground, in this case the peaks of the ridgeline to the east of the villages. The insurgents had previously used this high ground effectively to launch attacks against Coalition forces. For HAMMER DOWN, TF *Cacti* would not only insert forces on this ridge but also establish several strongpoints that would control the terrain and also support the clearance of the villages below. Further, by beginning the operation from this ridge, the clearance operation would proceed downhill from east to west. Maneuvering downhill while enjoying direct fire support from strongpoints on the high ground would place any enemy force at a tactical disadvantage.⁷

To facilitate the seizure of the ridgeline, TF *Cacti*'s planners wanted to employ helicopter landing zones different from those used in prior operations. For instance, in 2010, TF *Bulldog* had reused HLZ Chiefs near Tsangar that TF *Rock* had first designated back in 2007. While the return to this HLZ did not seem to have had any significant bearing on the conduct of BULLDOG BITE, TF *Cacti*'s planners wanted to take all measures necessary to retain tactical surprise. The rugged terrain on the eastern side of the Watapur, however, offered few large flat open areas that could accommodate CH-47 helicopters. Still, the TF staff also chose to rely almost solely on satellite imagery and analysis when choosing the new HLZs rather than sending out reconnaissance flights that could visually inspect the landing areas but might also alert the enemy to the imminent operation. In this way, the planners' emphasis on operational security for HAMMER DOWN left open the possibility for significant disruptions to

the operation should the helicopter pilots find the HLZs too small, too steep, or otherwise unsuitable.⁸

For its deployment, Lieutenant Colonel Tuley augmented his maneuver companies by assigning one platoon from its weapons company to each infantry company. The weapons company's platoons were equipped with tube-launched, optically-tracked, wire-guided (TOW) Improved Target Acquisition Systems (ITAS) and Javelin Close Combat Missile System anti-tank missiles, MK 19 40mm Grenade Machine Guns, and M2 .50 caliber machine guns. The creation of four company teams, each with two rifle platoons and one weapons platoon, ensured that each company commander had both maneuver and direct fire elements within his unit.⁹ TF *Cacti* reassigned platoons from the infantry companies and their weapons company to create a uniform organization for each of the four company teams that had responsibilities for geographic areas of operations. The battalion used this team task organization while training in Hawaii and at the National Training Center at Fort Irwin, California. By the time the battalion arrived in Afghanistan, the platoons in each of the teams had ample experience working with one another.¹⁰

During their training, the men of TF *Cacti* learned that they would also form the core of the brigade's Focused Targeting Force (FTF) for the duration of the deployment. Captain Christopher Bluhm, the commander of TF *Cacti*'s Headquarters and Headquarters Company, also served as commander of the FTF, which included one of TF *Cacti*'s rifle platoons and one platoon from the weapons company of its sister battalion in Kunar Province, 2d Battalion, 27th Infantry Regiment (2-27 IN) also nicknamed TF *No Fear*. The FTF concept originated with units deployed to Iraq and proved successful in identifying and neutralizing insurgent networks. Brigade commanders deploying to Afghanistan after 2008 began incorporating the concept into their units. Unlike the other units in TF *Cacti*, the FTF had no designated area of operation. Based at FOB Joyce in the Kunar Valley south of Asadabad, the FTF dedicated itself to neutralizing high value targets in TF *Bronco*'s AO and served as a quick reaction force (QRF) during major operations.¹¹

The plan for Operation HAMMER DOWN called for Captain Jacob Hughes' Bravo Company to conduct the battalion's decisive operation by air assaulting into HLZ Honey Eater on the ridgeline east and high above Gambir (Objective ARENA) and clear through the village. Forces from Captain Padraic Heiliger's Alpha Company would insert into HLZ Hillstar high up and to the southeast of Gambir and establish Strongpoint Danube north of the HLZ on the ridgeline to interdict the movement of

insurgent forces to or from Gambir. To provide additional protection for the clearance of Gambir, the Scout Platoon led by Captain Patrick Kerins, would insert into HLZ Cowbell near Zawardiwuz (Objective CYPRESS) and provide support-by-fire from Strongpoint Amazon on the ridgeline to the north of Gambir.

To clear Tsangar (Objective BONSAI) farther to the south, Captain Brian Kalaher's Delta Company would air-assault into HLZ Monarch and then proceed northwest toward the village. To cover Delta Company's movement, First Lieutenant Andrew Simmons would lead Alpha Company's 3d Platoon to provide overwatch from Strongpoint Elbe on the ridgeline above Tsangar. For the duration of the operation, every rifle platoon would be accompanied by a similar-sized Afghan National Army (ANA) element. The Afghan presence was particularly important to Bravo and Delta Companies who needed their partner Afghan platoons to lead the clearing of any Afghan structures in Gambir and Tsangar. Finally, a platoon from Charlie Company manned a traffic control point at COP Honaker Miracle to facilitate the anticipated flow of civilians out of the valley and was prepared to respond to insurgent attacks elsewhere. For a reserve, TF *Cacti* had the brigade FTF and a company of Afghan commandos advised by a US Army Special Forces ODA based at Jalalabad Airfield in Nangarhar Province. On 24 June, the day before the operation began, Colonel Kim informed Captain Michael Kolton, the commander of Bravo Company, 2-27 IN, that Kolton's company would serve as an additional reserve force. In total, the plan called for the commitment of three company teams and the scout platoon, while at least three rifle companies waited in reserve. It was to be the largest commitment of American combat power to the Watapur Valley since Coalition's campaign began in 2001.¹²

Opening Moves, 24-25 June

Just after dark on 24 June, the first CH-47s from the 6th Squadron, 6th Cavalry Regiment, began moving Soldiers toward the ridgelines overlooking the Watapur. Captain Kerins' Scout Platoon went in first, intending to land at HLZ Cow Bell north of Gambir. After making several passes, the Chinook pilot determined that the helicopters could not safely land on the unexpectedly steep slope, so he immediately flew Kerins and his men back to COP Honaker-Miracle. Kerins held a short conference with Major Marcus Wright, the battalion S3, who decided to divert the Scout Platoon to its alternate insertion point at HLZ Honey Eater. Once there, the Scouts would proceed south to establish Strongpoint Indus atop Hill 3181 and disrupt the flow of insurgents from the neighboring Chigal Valley into the Watapur. To reach the higher altitude of HLZ Honey Eater,

the CH-47s needed to lighten their loads. Kerins removed the eight men of Sergeant Christopher Galloway’s Recon Team One from one CH-47 and eight ANA soldiers from the second helicopter. With more than a third of his force left behind, Kerins re-boarded the CH-47 and set off again for the northern Watapur.¹³

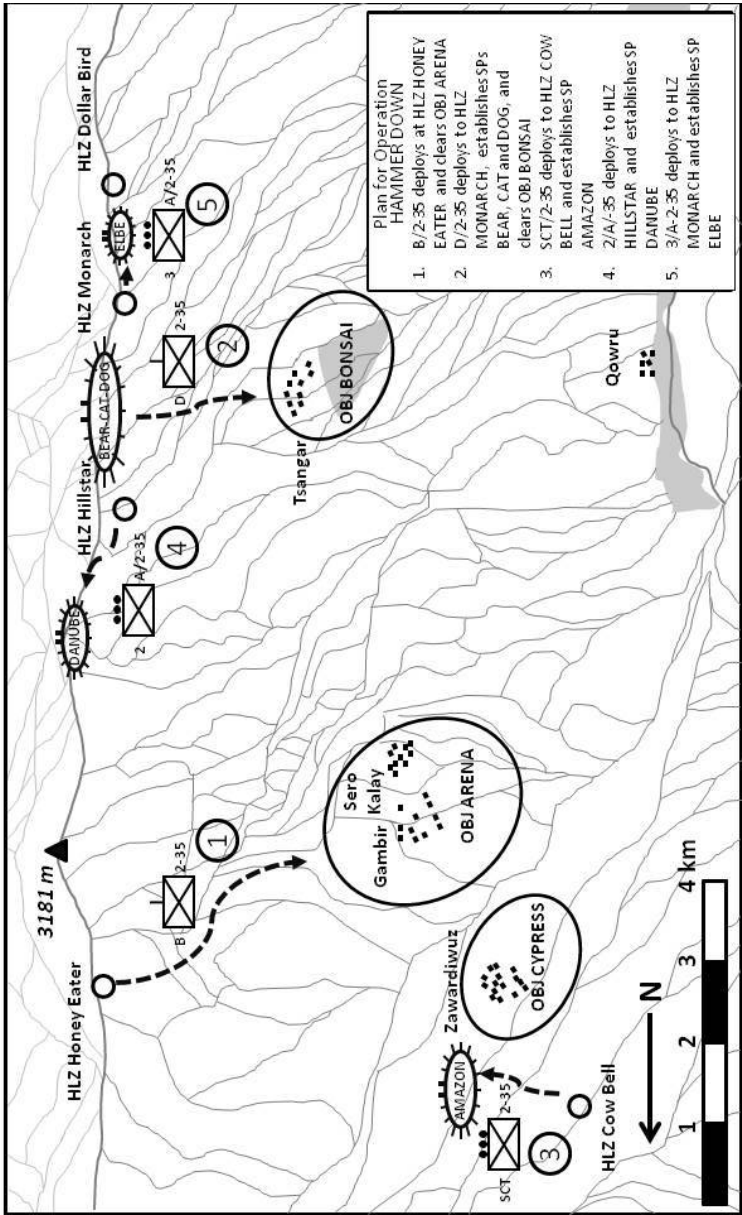


Figure 4: The plan for Operation HAMMER DOWN, 24-25 June 2011
Source: author/CSI generated.

At approximately 2330, the Scout Platoon landed at HLZ Honey Eater. The reduced force secured the HLZ and awaited the arrival of other units. Just after midnight, Captain Heiliger's Alpha Company began arriving at Honey Eater after the CH-47 pilots assessed HLZ Hillstar to the south along the ridgeline as unsafe for landing. The movement caught some Alpha Company Soldiers off guard as one of the company's squad leaders briefly raised his weapon after leaving the helicopter because they expected to be the only unit at Hillstar. Very quickly, the Alpha Company Soldiers realized that they and the Scouts had been diverted from their primary landing zones. Around 0200, as Captain Heiliger finished organizing his men for their movement, Bravo Company began its scheduled landing at HLZ Honey Eater. The CH-47 lifts that carried in Bravo Company also carried Sergeant Galloway's team from the Scout Platoon, thus bringing Kerins' unit back to full strength. As the operation unfolded, these late arrivals would prove vital for the Scout Platoon's ability to accomplish its mission.¹⁴

Because Bravo Company planned its movement to Gambir to occur in daylight, Hughes immediately established a temporary strongpoint near Honey Eater while Alpha Company and the Scout Platoon set out for their objectives in the darkness. Heiliger's Alpha Company troopers set off for Strongpoint Danube just after 0200 followed 20 minutes later by the Scouts. Both units soon found the nighttime movement arduous. The terrain atop the ridgeline proved extremely rough forcing the units to take winding paths and making it difficult for the squads to maintain consistent contact with one another. In some places, the terrain forced the Soldiers to their hands and knees to maintain their balance. The ANA units lacked Night Optical Devices causing them to move even slower than their American counterparts. In spite of the precautionary measures, some Soldiers suffered breathing problems due to the 2,000-meter difference in altitude between the ridgeline and their COPs. One of Alpha Company's mortarmen had to be evacuated out of the valley by helicopter because of altitude sickness. During the movement, Kerins spotted several recently abandoned logging campsites and directed his squads to travel using bounding movements in case they made contact with enemy elements he now suspected were in the area.¹⁵

Despite the difficulties, both groups successfully reached their assigned strongpoints. Kerins stopped the Scout Platoon just before dawn at 0400 to establish Strongpoint Indus but the leader of Recon Team Two, Staff Sergeant Nicholas Stetzel, reconnoitered another position 50 meters to the south that sat higher than their current position. Because this was

a superior location, Kerins immediately shifted the entire platoon to the new location. The new site offered appropriate elevation and large rock formations, making it a dominant position with significant cover. Kerins established his headquarters element in the center of the position with the 60mm mortar squad nearby while each of the three recon teams occupied rock formations on the northeast, east, and west side of the perimeter. The nine Afghan soldiers attached to the Scout Platoon split into groups of three and augmented each of the American teams. By 0700, the Scout Platoon completed its fighting positions and waited for Hughes' men to move on Gambir.¹⁶

Farther to the south, Heiliger's Alpha Company arrived at the location of Strongpoint Danube at 0500 and established fighting positions in a perimeter defense. The team's position ultimately spanned close to 500 meters from north to south but was only 150 meters east to west. The Alpha Company commander believed the eastern, southern, and western portions of his perimeter to be strong but worried about the northern side because the terrain there was less advantageous. Shoring up this sector of his perimeter would have to wait until later.¹⁷

Farther to the south along the ridge, the other units of TF *Cacti* that arrived also had to revise their plans quickly. Just before 0200, Lieutenant Simmons from Alpha Company's 3d Platoon learned from his CH-47 pilot in mid-flight that HLZ Monarch, their intended landing zone, had been deemed unusable. Simmons' men instead landed at HLZ Dollar Bird, approximately two kilometers farther to the south. Simmons immediately understood that landing at Dollar Bird had significantly lengthened the movement to Strongpoint Elbe, so he elected to leave behind his .50 caliber machine guns on their Skedcos (man-pulled pallets capable of transporting equipment or wounded Soldiers) aboard the CH-47. Once on the ground, Simmons had to reorganize his men for the movement because their chalks aboard the helicopters did not correspond to his squads. As Simmons assembled his men, Captain Kalaher's Delta Company also began landing at HLZ Dollar Bird. Delta Company, like Alpha Company, had also been diverted from HLZ Monarch. In the darkness, the squad leaders from both Alpha and Delta companies began flashing strobe lights at different points in the clearing to rally their men. One of the Afghan soldiers partnered with Simmons' platoon briefly went missing in the darkness until he was discovered sitting behind a bush. It took more than 30 minutes for everyone to find their units.¹⁸

Simmons wanted to move off the HLZ as fast as possible so that he could use the darkness to conceal his platoon's movement. Major Wright,

the battalion S3, radioed to Simmons that ISR platforms showed no sign of enemy activity between HLZ Dollar Bird and Strongpoint Elbe. With this information, the 3d Platoon set off for their strongpoint but the rough terrain and altitude made the travel difficult. Captain Kalaher waited for two hours to allow Simmons' platoon to get a head start before having his company set out for their strongpoints at 0430. Even with this head start, the lead elements from Delta Company occasionally caught up to the rear of Simmons' platoon, forcing the latter company to slow its progress.¹⁹

As daylight began flooding into the Watapur and found both elements still on the move, Simmons began moving his squads using bounding overwatch. Eventually, the platoon reached Strongpoint Elbe and began building its fighting positions. Meanwhile, to the south, Kalaher's advance was delayed significantly when, at 0630, Sergeant Jason Grammo's point team spotted an unarmed young male. An Afghan soldier insisted that he could catch the young man and ran after him but he quickly lost sight of the fleeing man. One of the company's interpreters warned that insurgents used children as scouts in order to take advantage the Americans' Rules of Engagement (ROE) restrictions that prohibited firing upon children. Soon afterwards, radio traffic picked up by the Low Level Voice Intercept (LLVI) team indicated that the insurgents were aware of Delta Company's presence and planned to attack. Kalaher decided to halt the company and establish temporary fighting positions. The company waited anxiously for two hours but the threat never materialized and the company began moving to its strongpoints again, arriving finally at 1100.²⁰

Each of Kalaher's platoons quickly set up in adjacent platoon strongpoints. First Lieutenant Tyler Martin established his platoon at Strongpoint Bear to the north while First Lieutenants Matt Snyder and Tyler Overcash set up their platoon positions at Strongpoints Cat and Dog respectively. The Delta Company positions were arrayed triangularly with Strongpoint Cat the apex of the triangle pointed westward towards the heart of the valley. The platoons on each of the strongpoints could support each other due to their proximity. The company focused its attention on the western slope of the valley because dense brush and a series of ravines beneath their positions prevented easy observation into the near ground, providing some cover for an approaching enemy. The eastern slope of the ridgeline faced the neighboring Chigal Valley and appeared too steep for any insurgents to reach the American positions.²¹

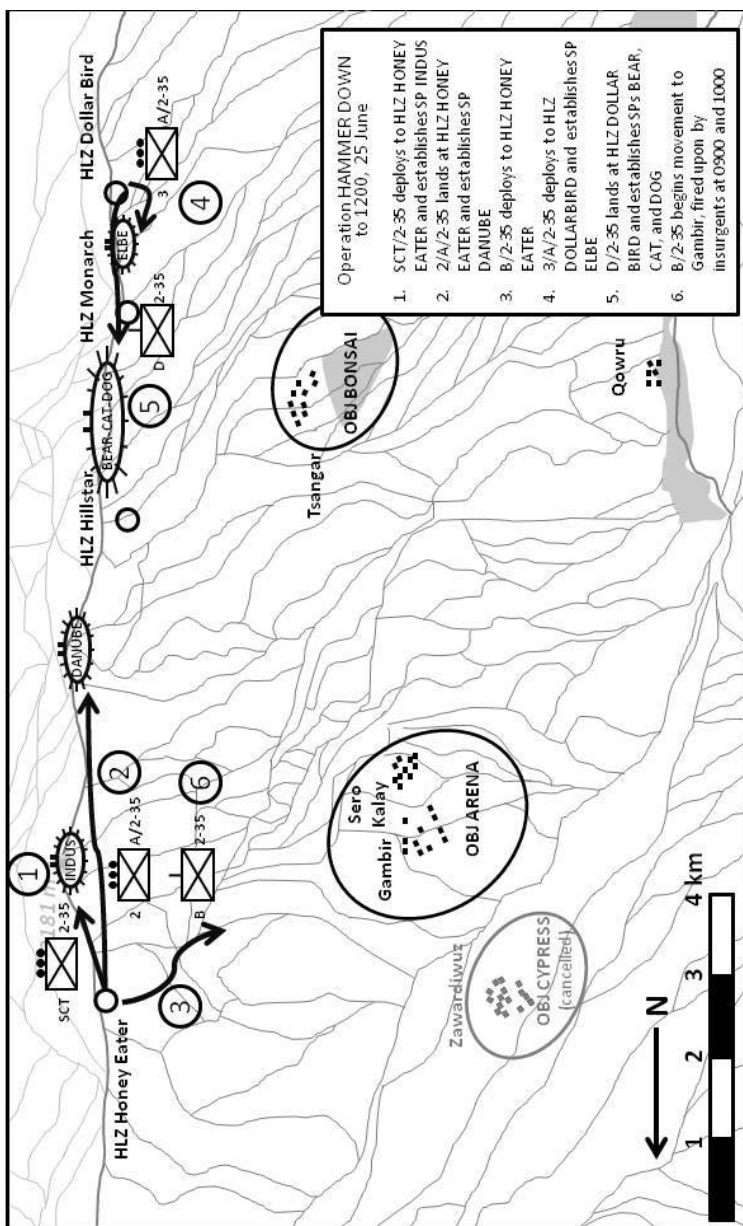


Figure 5: Operation HAMMER DOWN to 1200, 25 June 2011.

Source: author/CSI generated.

By 1100, the Scouts, Alpha Company, and Delta Company had all reached their strongpoints on the ridgeline and provided overwatch for Hughes' Bravo Company as it moved down the ridgeline from HLZ Honey Eater towards Gambir. Designated as the battalion's decisive effort, Bravo Company boasted the greatest combat power of the three company teams. Hughes had all three of his platoons, each numbering approximately

20 Americans, partnered with a platoon of 15 Afghans. In addition, Hughes had his headquarters element that included Joint Terminal Attack Controllers, a 60mm mortar section and a sapper team that would defuse and destroy any IEDs or other dangerous explosives found in Gambir.²² Also attached to the company headquarters was a Combat Camera Team and a Female Engagement Team (FET) prepared to work with any Afghan women found in Gambir.



Figure 6: Bravo Company at HLZ Honey Eater preparing to move. First Lieutenant Dimitri del Castillo, 1st Platoon, is facing the camera on the right.

Source: 2-35 Infantry, 25th Infantry Division.

Starting at 0500, Bravo Company left its temporary strongpoint and began trekking down the steep ridgeline toward Gambir. Several hundred meters separated the platoons as each moved toward the town to start their clearance missions. Once they reached the village, 2d Platoon, led by First Lieutenant Colin Brodmerkel, was to clear the northern third of Gambir. First Lieutenant Dimitri del Castillo's 1st Platoon, accompanied by Captain Hughes, intended to clear through the center of the village. First Lieutenant Cody Mossberg's 3d Platoon would clear the southern end of Gambir accompanied by Bravo Company's First Sergeant, First Sergeant Paul de Lemos.²³

Once the team began moving, it became apparent that many of TF *Cacti*'s planning assumptions were incorrect. Hughes' men quickly found the "Gambir Jungle" to be an unforgiving environment through which to move. Gambir lay 1,000 meters below HLZ Honey Eater and the steep slope

was rocky and heavily forested. In fact, the American Soldiers compared the area to the Rockies, Adirondacks, and other high mountain ranges they had visited in the United States. The rugged slope took its toll on the Soldiers as they began sustaining a high number of injuries, including multiple twisted ankles. The sergeant leading the FET attachment suffered torn knee ligaments and required a MEDEVAC. Captain Hughes himself tore tendons in both ankles but stayed with his team.²⁴

The terrain caused two problems for Bravo Company. First, the plan had called for the unit to reach Gambir by the afternoon and clear through the village on the same day. By mid-morning, doubts began to grow whether the team could reach the village on schedule.

Second, the steep slope and broken ground made the team's movement far more difficult than expected. Hughes had intended for the platoons to move down the slope using the bounding overwatch technique, a form of maneuver that ensured at least one platoon was always ready to provide fire support while the other platoons moved. The trees, gullies, and small ridges along their path, however, made it impossible for each of the platoons to maintain visual contact with one another, even when spaced only a few hundred meters apart.²⁵

At approximately 0900, Lieutenant Brodmerkel's 2d Platoon on the north side of the formation made first contact with insurgents. The Afghan Army platoon had taken the lead during the descent because the Afghans proved especially adept at navigating their way through the mountains. The three American squads arrayed themselves in wedge formations approximately 50 meters behind the Afghans and 2d Platoon's platoon sergeant, Sergeant First Class Joel Babb, helped coordinate the movements of the two platoons. Babb noticed three men to the northwest of their position carrying RPGs. Babb and the Afghan platoon set out to intercept the two insurgents as they fled into an open field. Informed of the sighting, Captain Hughes called in support from an AH-64 Apache gunship, which promptly engaged and killed the insurgents.²⁶

With this threat dispatched, the company continued its advance toward Gambir. At 1000, approximately one hour later, the 3d Platoon made contact with another insurgent group. The space between the platoons was farther than intended because the terrain had forced Mossberg's men to deviate from their planned route. As the platoon attempted to get back on track, it exited the tree line and entered an area of scrub brush that offered little cover or concealment. Insurgents hiding behind a large rock formation began firing on First Lieutenant Mossberg's unit,

forcing everyone to find cover. The Afghan soldiers with the 3d Platoon spotted the insurgent position first and opened fire on it. Staff Sergeant Mike Nickerson's first squad, which was moving across higher ground, lay exposed to the enemy fire and took the brunt of the contact. AH-64s attempted to attack the enemy position but the gunners refused to open fire without positive identification of friend and foe. The infantrymen then marked the insurgent position with 40mm smoke and high-explosive rounds, allowing Alpha Company to attack. The first gun run hit the target but the pilots decided to make a second pass. First Sergeant Paul de Lemos, Sergeant First Class Ricky Reibsome, and the platoon medic stood at the center of the American position awaiting the gun run when rounds started hitting near their position. de Lemos and Reibsome quickly realized that the rounds were from the Apache gunship and they immediately called a cease-fire over the radio. No one died but the shrapnel from ricochets hit the medic in the leg and a rifleman's wrist, cutting a tendon.



Figure 7: Bravo Company Soldiers moving toward Gambir on 25 June.

Source: 2-35 Infantry, 25th Infantry Division.

With the volume of insurgent fire greatly diminished, the platoon called in a MEDEVAC to evacuate the two wounded Soldiers. The UH-60 sent down a lift basket to pull the two men out, but as the helicopter hovered over the 3d Platoon's position, the insurgents increased their fire, forcing the helicopter to fly away with the two Soldiers dangling in the basket below. Soon after, the insurgents withdrew from the 3d Platoon's vicinity.²⁷

By midday on 25 June, only Bravo Company had made contact with the enemy. Soldiers on Strongpoints Indus and Elbe had seen civilians nearby, but a direct threat had yet to materialize. This situation began to change along the ridgeline, however, during the afternoon. Just after 1200, a force of squad size attacked Alpha Company's Strongpoint Danube from the west with small arms and machine gun fire. Coalition forces at the strongpoint responded with mortar and small arms fire, causing the insurgents to withdraw after a 10 minutes fighting. Meanwhile, the Scouts at Strongpoint Indus had attempted to stay hidden among the rocks on their position. They believed that the shepherds seen earlier in the morning had spotted their position but the LLVI traffic indicated that the Scouts' location remained unknown to the enemy. However, at 1230 when Deputy Commanding General in RC-East, Brigadier General Gary Volesky, and Lieutenant Colonel Tuley attempted to land at Strongpoint Indus in a clearing the Scouts had marked off, the Blackhawk pilot thought the landing zone unsafe and flew away. The translator with the Scouts soon reported LLVI traffic indicating that the insurgents were now fully aware of their position.²⁸



Figure 8: Bravo Company's view of Gambir from the east during the movement on 25 June.

Source: 2-35 Infantry, 25th Infantry Division.

Between 1300 and 1500, insurgent forces attacked every element of TF *Cacti* in the Watapur. The first and most important attack came against Bravo Company. Already delayed by earlier contact, by early afternoon,

the company was still nearly a kilometer east of (and above) Gambir. As First Lieutenant del Castillo's 1st Platoon moved through a heavily forested area, it came to a large spur jutting out of the sloping ridgeline and pointing due west. To move around the obstacle, the platoon split into two elements with one half moving down the north side of the spur and the other half on the south side. As the spur ended overlooking a small gulch, the platoon found a small *qalat* that had been built into the high ground. At approximately 1300, Captain Hughes received radio intercepts indicating that there was an insurgent force of unknown strength nearby. Almost immediately after receiving the report, a hail of gunfire erupted. Insurgents armed with PKM machine guns and AK-47 assault rifles had escaped detection by US thermal sensors and successfully sprang an ambush on the 1st Platoon. The insurgents had established positions to the north, south, and west of the platoon's avenue of approach and caught the Coalition force in a deadly crossfire.²⁹ When the firing started, the platoon Radio Telephone Operator (RTO), Specialist William Jenks, called out over the radio, "They're everywhere! We don't know where we are getting shot at from!"³⁰

Within a few minutes, enemy rounds had hit four Coalition Soldiers. One round struck First Lieutenant del Castillo's chest just above his armor plate, mortally wounding him. He died within minutes, long before any MEDEVAC helicopter could reach him. Insurgent bullets grazed squad leader Staff Sergeant Eric Hinson's lip and the neck of Squad Automatic Weapon (SAW) gunner Specialist Richard J. Perkins. One of the ANA Soldiers also received a wound to his leg. Since the insurgent positions allowed them to place enfilade fire on the 1st Platoon in its entirety, everyone scrambled for cover during the opening minutes of the firefight. The company HQ element, moving with 1st Platoon, came under fire as well. When Specialist Jenks tried to avoid the hail of gunfire, he dove onto Captain Hughes' lower legs, causing further injury to the company commander's ankles and virtually immobilizing him. Nearby, the fire support officer (FSO), First Lieutenant David Hoffmaster, wrenched his back while trying to avoid fire from a PKM gunner. Thus, within the first few minutes of battle, Bravo Company's leadership had suffered significant loss.³¹

Once the surprise of the ambush passed, the men of Bravo Company tried to pinpoint enemy locations and return fire. Some Soldiers spotted a group of women in front of a small cluster of *qalats* to the north of their position directing fire for insurgents taking cover inside the dwellings. The insurgents did this knowing that the Coalition ROE forbade units firing

into *qalats* without first confirming that no civilians were inside. Despite the team's precarious position, Hughes refused to authorize direct fire on the buildings, deciding that he did not want to risk harming any civilians.³²

With the platoon under heavy fire, Sergeant Shane Olney's squad near the head of the formation attempted to find cover. While under fire, the men moved towards the *qalat* at the end of the spur with the goal of clearing and occupying it. One Soldier tossed a fragmentary grenade into the structure. The squad then entered the building and cleared it room by room, finding inside only the dwelling's owner, an elderly Afghan male. With the *qalat* now under American control, troops from the rest of the platoon moved towards the more protected position.³³

As the Soldiers made their way toward the structure, insurgents shot the platoon's interpreter in the back of the head, killing him and causing the body to roll down the gulch in front of the *qalat*. Several Soldiers, including Olney, Team Leader Sergeant Tony Kennard, Specialist Derrick Dickerson, Staff Sergeant Kazimieras Urbonavicius, and an engineer, Sergeant Nigel Kelly, worked their way down into the gulch to collect the interpreter's body. Before they could do so, however, a round hit Sergeant Kelly's hip, immobilizing him. Since Kelly remained conscious, the others switched their focus from recovering the dead Afghan interpreter to moving the wounded engineer to cover for eventual evacuation. A pair of Kelly's fellow engineers moved down to provide assistance but the steep bank and the withering enemy fire left them trapped in the gulch with the wounded Kelly. For most of the afternoon, they laid low, trying not to draw attention from nearby insurgents who might easily have killed them.³⁴

Farther up the hill, Sergeant First Class Niobel Santos, now the 1st Platoon leader after First Lieutenant del Castillo's death, entered the *qalat* and established a Command Post (CP). Other Soldiers moved out of their exposed positions to rally at the building. Sergeant Ridge Kaaekuahiwi, the 2d Squad Leader, rounded the bend of the spur and saw Specialist Carlos Ackerman, combat cameraman Sergeant Elwyn Lovelace, and Private First Class Herrick providing cover from the ground in front of the *qalat*. As Kaaekuahiwi moved towards the *qalat*'s doorway, an insurgent sniper began firing on the Soldiers, causing Kaaekuahiwi to take cover inside the *qalat*. He brought his weapon to bear to return fire but a round flew through the window and struck him in the arm. Outside, Ackerman, Weapons Squad Leader Staff Sergeant David Ngo, and others returned fire so that more Soldiers could enter the *qalat*. As Herrick followed this group inside, a round ricocheted off the dirt floor of the *qalat*, striking him in the jaw.³⁵

As the men of the 1st Platoon returned fire, Bravo Company's other two platoons made contact with many of the same insurgents. As soon as Jenks' radio call came over the net, First Lieutenant Brodmerkel immediately halted his 2d Platoon and established a temporary fighting position. Squad Leader Staff Sergeant Travis Watson and Team Leader Sergeant Cameron Hawkins moved over a nearby spur to locate insurgent positions, which they discovered approximately 80 meters away. The enemy had chosen their location well enough that Watson and Hawkins could not pinpoint any individual fighting positions. Unknowingly, the Americans had taken cover next to a cliff face atop which was an insurgent fighting position, with another insurgent fire team just to their east. The enemy fighters fired on Watson and Hawkins, and their position was close enough to the insurgent locations that rounds from American M240 machine guns and three-round bursts from Afghan soldiers AK-47 assault rifles, presumably fired from 1st Platoon's position, also struck all around them. An orbiting OH-58D Kiowa Warrior gunship believed Watson and Hawkins to be insurgents and lined up for a gun run but their frantic signaling with VS-17 panels, chemical lights, and radio calls stopped the run before it started. Under covering fire, the squad returned to its previous position.

In this chaotic situation, with the three platoons separated by hundreds of meters of extremely difficult terrain and the helicopters continuing to fire at suspected enemy positions, maneuver in support of 1st Platoon was extremely difficult. Captain Hughes directed Brodmerkel's platoon to move his unit to the 1st Platoon's position and Brodmerkel prepared his Soldiers for the maneuver but the intensity of the fire from the OH-58Ds as well as small arms fire from both enemy and friendly units nearby, kept 2d Platoon pinned down. The situation for 2d Platoon worsened when one Soldier fell with severe heat stroke. Burdened by the heat casualty and effectively suppressed by enemy fire, First Lieutenant Brodmerkel had to tell his commander that he could not move without risking additional casualties.³⁶

To the south, the 3d Platoon had taken cover on a spur approximately 500 meters from 1st Platoon's position. From there, First Lieutenant Mossberg and First Sergeant de Lemos could observe the 1st Platoon's fight and provide support. Some insurgents occupying positions between the American platoons fired on the 3d Platoon's position but rounds from the 3d Platoon's M320 grenade launchers suppressed the insurgent fire. Almost immediately, Mossberg and de Lemos began assisting their beleaguered sister platoon. Their mortar squad remained out of position during the fight but de Lemos assisted First Lieutenant Hoffmaster, the

FSO, in directing the OH-58D pilots onto their targets. Understandably nervous after the near-fratricide incident earlier that morning, the Kiowa pilots demanded positive identification of positions before initiating any gun runs. Once the men displayed their identification panels, the Kiowas began attacking the insurgents. Throughout the afternoon, Hoffmaster remained in close contact with the helicopters, including the AH-64 Apache pilots who relieved the Kiowas on station. From Hoffmaster's previous experience, such gun runs should have broken the insurgents' will to fight and forced them to withdraw. Instead, the insurgent showed an uncommon steadfastness, remaining in place and continuing to block the American advance on Gambir.³⁷

While the insurgents continued the fight into the late afternoon, their volume of fire had reduced to the point that Hughes felt confident enough to call in MEDEVAC helicopters. When the Blackhawks arrived over the 1st Platoon's position and attempted to lift out Sergeant Kelly, the insurgents fired multiple RPGs at the helicopter and came within meters of hitting it. The RPGs signaled other insurgents to increase the volume of small arms fire, driving the MEDEVAC away without recovering Kelly and forcing Hughes to suspend any further flights until the team could reduce the enemy's combat effectiveness. Unfortunately, Sergeant Kelly succumbed to his wound before another helicopter could arrive.³⁸

Dusk brought relief for Bravo Company as the insurgents lack of night vision equipment forced them to withdraw. An Apache helicopter fired rockets on a suspected insurgent position to assist the rest of 1st Platoon to consolidate at the *qalat*. Olney, Kennard, and the other Soldiers at the bottom of the gulch finally managed to move up the embankment and into the *qalat*. They brought along the bodies of the interpreter and Sergeant Kelly, leaving them in the CP until a helicopter could retrieve them. With three dead, several other key personnel wounded, and the three platoons short of their objective, Bravo Company's mission was in jeopardy.³⁹

The Fights on the Ridgelines

As the fight raged near Gambir, insurgent forces attacked each of the strongpoints on the ridgeline above Gambir. A squad-sized enemy group attacked the Alpha Company position at Strongpoint Danube at approximately 1400. As with the earlier engagement, the insurgents withdrew after a brief firefight with the Coalition forces. At 1430, an insurgent team attacked the eastern and northeastern sides of Strongpoint Indus but fled once fire from the Scouts and an Afghan Army unit began pinpointing their positions. As the insurgents withdrew, the Scouts'

Joint Tactical Air Controller (JTAC) called in close air support to attack suspected insurgent exfiltration routes. At 1500, approximately 20 insurgents operating in three or four separate teams attacked the line at Strongpoint Bear-Cat-Dog manned by Delta Company at the southern end of the battlefield. The insurgents used the draws, ravines, and dense brush to the west of the strongpoints to conceal their approach and their greater strength allowed for a sustained attack of approximately 45 minutes, more than those their comrades mounted against the other strongpoints. Delta Company Soldiers responded with 60mm mortars fire and M320 grenade launchers but also called in an OH-58D Kiowa Warrior for strafing runs. The insurgents attempted to rally in the face of Coalition firepower but two CAS attacks forced them to withdraw.⁴⁰

Intelligence gathered from LLVI intercepts and other sources indicated that the insurgents that attacked the strongpoints during the afternoon had not coordinated their activities. All the enemy elements relied on one common technique of launching their assaults with RPGs for the maximum amount of surprise and shock. The RPG fire rarely caused significant damage but it did lead to momentary confusion in the American units, an opportunity that was exploited by enemy marksmen using well aimed fire. An insurgent group repeated these methods when they attacked Strongpoint Indus at 1700. As in the earlier attacks, the insurgents assaulted the better-defended eastern and northeastern positions and virtually ignored the western side of the strongpoint. Staff Sergeant Stetzel's positions on the northeastern perimeter took the brunt of the attack as the insurgents used fire and maneuver tactics to reach a rock formation only 50 meters from the perimeter. The small Scout Platoon employed its available firepower to forestall any chance of being overrun, using 40mm grenades liberally to cover the dead space between positions. As Stetzel's squad engaged in an intense firefight, a three-man Afghan Army PKM team with Sergeant Galloway left its position to find a better vantage point. As they fired on the enemy, an insurgent round hit the PKM gunner near his collarbone. The platoon medic attempted to treat the Afghan Soldier but he died very quickly. Even with the loss, the Scouts managed to retake the initiative, especially behind Specialist Jenkins' accurate M320 fire. After 20 minutes, the insurgents broke off the attack, and the Scouts again called in a CAS strike on the enemy as they withdrew.⁴¹

Fallen Angel

During the afternoon and evening of 25 July, Lieutenant Colonel Tuley and the rest of TF *Cacti*'s leadership took stock of the progress of Operation HAMMER DOWN. The battalion tactical command post (TAC) at COP Honaker-Miracle closely monitored the flow of civilians out of the Watapur Valley throughout 25 June. Soldiers from the 2d Platoon, Charlie Company, had driven up from FOB Joyce at 1800 on 24 June and established a traffic control point at Shamir Kowt later that night. The Americans provided assistance to the Afghan National Police detachment running the TCP and screening civilians. Throughout the day, a large number of trucks carried women and children out of the Watapur. The Afghan police screened the few military aged males encountered throughout the day, questioning anyone whose name appeared in their database as a suspected insurgent. The traffic increased steadily throughout the day and the Americans estimated that thousands had fled the valley by dusk when the flow of civilians began to decrease. The flight of the civilian populace would factor heavily into Tuley's later decisions.⁴²

As the battalion commander reviewed the operation, he understood that ambushes had completely stalled Bravo Company's advance on Gambir and blunted the effectiveness of its leadership. Elsewhere, the strongpoints manned by the blocking forces and by Delta Company, awaiting the signal to clear Tsangar, had likewise come under attack. Because of these challenges, Tuley and his staff elected to activate elements of the battalion reserve. As TF *Cacti* had become the brigade's priority for the duration of the operation, there were troops, aircraft, and other assets made available from elsewhere in TF *Bronco*'s AO. Therefore, at 1500, Tuley notified Captain Christopher Bluhm that the FTF would reinforce Bravo Company that night. Bluhm and his 60 Soldiers would consolidate at the 1st Platoon's position outside Gambir. With the additional forces, Bluhm would then lead the combined force to clear the village the next day. The brigade alerted the Afghan commando element and Captain Kolton's B/2-27 IN Company to prepare to reinforce the operation.⁴³

That afternoon and evening, Captain Bluhm prepared his force for action. Initially, the plan called for the FTF to land at HLZ Carolina a few hundred meters to the west of the current position of Bravo Company's 1st Platoon. Given the likely insurgent presence in the area, Bluhm elected instead to land at Honey Eater and retrace Bravo Company's route down the ridgeline. To ease his Soldiers' burden and to make the movement quicker, Bluhm insisted that his men pack lightly and limit the amount of food, water, and ammunition they carried. He also had an Afghan platoon

at his disposal and planned to have it clear the village once the combined element reached Gambir.⁴⁴

The FTF began loading onto Chinooks late in the evening of 25 June, although not without incident. To keep the helicopters under the weight limit, the pilot of the first Chinook insisted that the FTF further lighten their load. As a result, five Afghan Soldiers stayed behind at FOB Joyce. Bluhm had intended to board the CH-47 carrying Chalk One but he accidentally found himself on board Chalk Two's helicopter. Once the helicopters were loaded, they set out for HLZ Honey Eater. Chalk One, including the 1st Platoon leader First Lieutenant Nathan Peterson, landed there at 2300. Since no American units had been at Honey Eater for almost 24 hours, Peterson immediately dispatched his squads to secure the perimeter and await the landing of Captain Bluhm and Chalk Two.⁴⁵

Aboard the second helicopter, Bluhm and the troops prepared to land at the HLZ. Sergeant Arturo Bedoy recalled that the helicopter swayed in flight more than usual and the crew chief yelled out multiple "one minute" warnings. As the CH-47 neared the landing zone, the helicopter hit a pocket of "dead air" and dropped suddenly toward the ground below. Bluhm heard a crash and saw men thrown out of their jump seats. On the ground, First Lieutenant Peterson had spotted the Chinook heading for a different part of the landing zone than he expected. Soon, the sound of metal twisting and scraping together reverberated across the landing zone. Peterson had the foresight to yell to his RTO to duck as a chunk of debris flew just over their heads. The helicopter carrying Chalk Two had crashed at HLZ Honey Eater.⁴⁶ Peterson recalled thinking, "Why does this have to happen to us?"⁴⁷

Aboard the helicopter, a fire had broken out when the fuselage crashed against the mountainside. Several Soldiers, including Bedoy and Sergeant First Class William Smith, lost consciousness upon impact. Other passengers felt for broken bones or screamed in pain, eventually waking Sergeant Bedoy. Disoriented by the crash, Bluhm gradually regained enough of his faculties to realize that a fire had started inside the downed aircraft and that his Soldiers were not trying to get off the helicopter. He sprang to action and shepherded his injured and dazed men out of the helicopter. Bedoy, now more alert, tried to help Private First Class Mendez and Sergeant Smith through the Chinook's front door but found it blocked. As he moved towards the open back ramp, he noticed the helicopter's crew chief and door gunner slumped over and believed they were both dead.⁴⁸



Figure 9: Chinook crash site.

Source: then First Lieutenant Nathan Peterson.

The concussions sustained by most of those on the helicopter created much confusion. Bluhm asked his JTAC (Staff Sergeant Beversdorf) to determine their exact grid coordinates and for his RTO, Specialist Jasper Cothran, to relay information back to the battalion headquarters. When Cothran tried to follow his commander back into the wreckage, Bluhm snapped for him to stay “right f---ing there!”⁴⁹ Bluhm returned to the Chinook’s interior and exhorted his dazed men to get off of the helicopter. Several Soldiers remained unconscious and had to be carried off the aircraft. Bluhm believed later that he should have given his Soldiers a few minutes to clear their heads, given that many had likely suffered concussions but the need for safety trumped all. Bluhm himself had suffered a concussion, blurring his judgment, but he only realized this when he returned to Cothran’s position, discovering that he had foolishly ordered the RTO to remain in a position next to a burning piece of the helicopter’s engine.⁵⁰

By this time, First Lieutenant Peterson and the others from Chalk One arrived to help. Peterson expected to find a scene of mass carnage, and was confused by the sight of men walking around the wrecked helicopter, initially believing them to be part of his chalk. He soon found Captain Bluhm who gave Peterson temporary command of the unit. Peterson’s

RTO, Specialist Kohl McLeod, took over communications duties and began talking with the battalion TAC. Bluhm returned to the helicopter to find the crew chief (Bedoy) he had previously assumed to be dead alive and on board the wreckage with another Soldier. Bluhm promptly got them out of the helicopter.⁵¹

As Bluhm and Peterson worked to restore order, the CH-47 carrying Chalk Three, including the FTF's executive officer, Captain Daniel Lennox, the first sergeant, First Sergeant Shawn Burnah, and First Lieutenant Denis Campbell's 2d Platoon, landed nearby. While in flight, Lennox and Burnah had heard the "fallen angel" radio calls, warned their medic to prepare for casualties, and directed their squad leaders to move immediately to secure the perimeter. Burnah left the Chinook first and observed the surreal picture of one of the crew chiefs coaxing a wounded man to crab walk down the hill.⁵² Burnah then moved down to the impromptu command post established near the crash site and met with a still-dazed Captain Bluhm who excitedly told Burnah, "I just fell out of the sky!"⁵³ As Burnah conferred with Bluhm, they heard the pilot of the downed Chinook, Captain Buddy Lee, asking everyone where he could find Captain Bluhm. Once he did so, Lee, who had suffered significant head trauma, apologized profusely for the crash.⁵⁴

Burnah helped to sort through the wounded, determining the severity of injuries and the priority of evacuation needed. Meanwhile, First Lieutenant Peterson convinced the crew of Chalk Three's CH-47 to remain at the landing zone long enough to evacuate the injured. The Chinook stayed at Honey Eater long enough for the FTF to assist 13 wounded Soldiers aboard the helicopter. The evacuees included a platoon sergeant, a team leader, and nearly all of Sergeant Bedoy's squad save for a medic. Another squad leader, Staff Sergeant Cipriano Castaneda, stayed behind even though the medics determined that his spinal cord had suffered damage in the crash. Captain Lee and the other Chinook crewmen left on a separate MEDEVAC flight.⁵⁵ Miraculously, no one died during the crash despite the rotor blades having ripped into the upper portion of the Chinook's fuselage, tearing it open "like a sardine can."⁵⁶ The helicopter had crashed on sloping terrain but its left side landing gear stayed upright and prevented the aircraft from rolling down the ridgeline.⁵⁷

After the evacuation of the injured, Bluhm dispatched his Soldiers to occupy positions on high ground around the landing zone. The crash left him with only 47 Americans, with several of those limited by their injuries. The crash had thrown the mission to assist Bravo Company into doubt. Most importantly, Captain Bluhm realized that he needed to secure the

crash site to prevent the insurgents from seizing any sensitive electronic equipment from the helicopter. In addition to the security requirements, experiences from the “Black Hawk Down” incident during the Battle of Mogadishu in Somali in 1993 and the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, demonstrated the propaganda value that insurgent groups attached to images of downed American aircraft. The wreck of the Chinook needed to be secured.⁵⁸

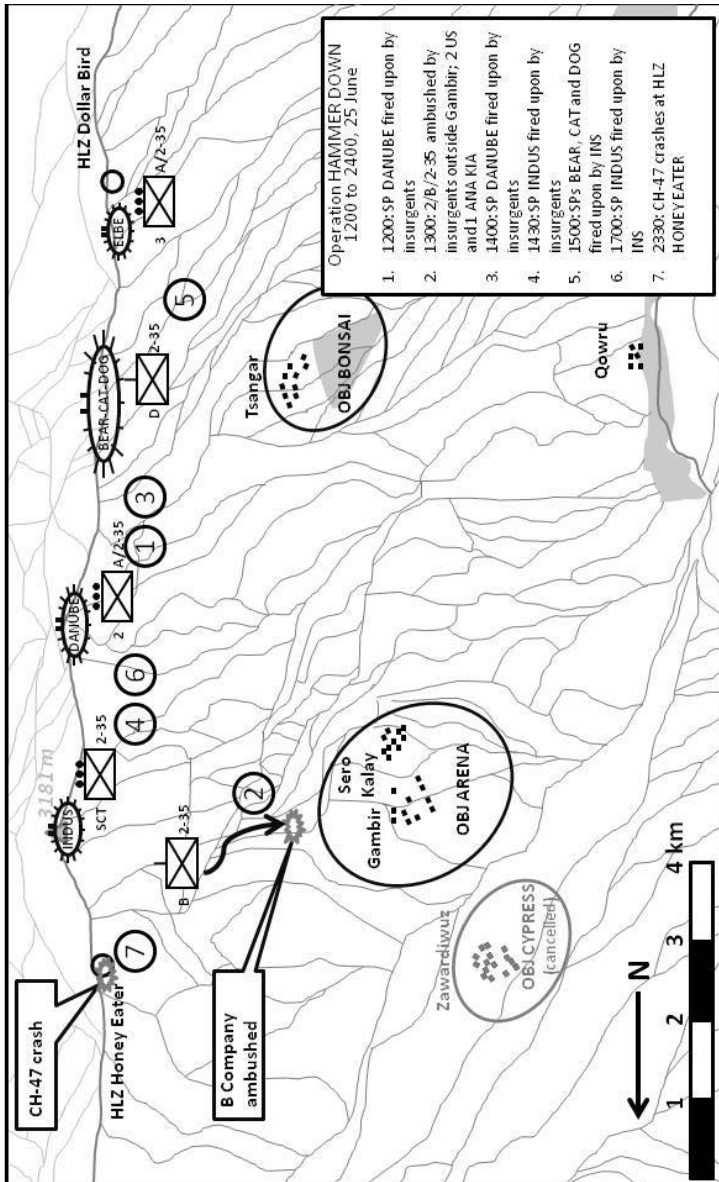


Figure 10: Operation HAMMER DOWN, 1200 to 2400, 25 June 2011.

Source: author/CSI generated.

As 25 June came to a close, events in the Watapur had caused several significant changes to Operation HAMMER DOWN. The terrain had proven far more difficult than anticipated and led to several of the major shifts in the operation. The ambush of Bravo Company outside of Gambir had forced the TF *Cacti* commander to commit a portion of his reserve and the lost Chinook at HLZ Honey Eater had then placed that reserve force in jeopardy. The second day of the operation was now ending with the outcome of HAMMER DOWN hanging in the balance.

Notes

1. 25th ID history. <http://www.25idl.army.mil/history.html> (accessed 11 July 2012).
2. 2-35 IN Leadership, group interview, 1-5, 47-9; Major Patrick Stich, interview by Ryan Wadle, Combat Studies Institute, Fort Leavenworth, KS, 14 May 2012, 3.
3. 2-35 IN Leadership, group interview, 9-10; Baca, Van Wyhe, Gaulin, group interview, 1-2.
4. 2-35 IN Leadership, group interview, 4-5, 7.
5. Stich, interview, 5.
6. 2-35 IN Leadership, group interview, 9-10; First Lieutenant Matthew Baca, First Lieutenant Trey Van Wyhe, First Lieutenant Chad Gaulin, group interview by Ryan Wadle, Combat Studies Institute, Schofield Barracks, HI, 26 April 2012, 1-2.
7. 2-35 IN Leadership, group interview, 6, 39-40.
8. Baca, Van Wyhe, Gaulin, group interview, 2-3, 10.
9. Each of the task-organized teams in TF 2-35 used nicknames as designations: Apache (Alpha) Team, Bastard (Bravo) Team, Charlie Rock (Charlie) Team, and Gundogs (Delta) Team. This study will refer to these units by their official designations for these companies: Alpha, Bravo, Charlie and Delta.
10. Department of the Army, *Field Manual (FM) 3-21.12 (Fm 7-8), The Infantry Weapons Company* (Headquarters, Department of the Army: Washington, DC: 2008), 1-4 to 1-5; Captain Brian Kalaher, interview by Ryan Wadle, Combat Studies Institute, Fort Leavenworth, KS, 24 May 2012, 4-5.
11. Major Christopher Bluhm and First Sergeant Shawn Burnah, interview by Ryan Wadle, Combat Studies Institute, Schofield Barracks, HI, 24 April 2012, 1-4 ; Captain Daniel Lennox, interview by Ryan Wadle, Combat Studies Institute, Fort Leavenworth, KS, 20 March 2012, 8; Stich, interview, 12-13.
12. Captain Jacob Hughes and Sergeant First Class Paul de Lemos, interview by Ryan Wadle, Combat Studies Institute, Schofield Barracks, HI, 25 April 2012, 1-4; Captain Padraic Heiliger and Sergeant First Class Acania Puletasi, interview by Ryan Wadle, Combat Studies Institute, Schofield Barracks, HI, 25 April 2012, 1-2; First Lieutenant Aaron Heaviland and First Lieutenant Andrew Simmons, interview by Ryan Wadle, Combat Studies Institute, Schofield Barracks, HI, 25 April 2012, 14; Captain Patrick Kerins, interview by Ryan Wadle, Combat Studies Institute, Fort Leavenworth, KS, 3 May 2012, 2-3; Kalaher, interview, 2, 5-6; Baca, Van Wyhe, Gaulin, group interview, 8-9; Charlie Company Non-Commissioned Officers, group interview by Ryan Wadle, Combat Studies Institute, Schofield Barracks, HI, 26 April

2012, 4-5; 2-35 IN Leadership, group interview, 17; Captain Michael Kolton, interview by Ryan Wadle, Combat Studies Institute, Schofield Barracks, HI, 27 April 2012, 1.

13. Kerins, interview, 5, 7; Scout Platoon Non-Commissioned Officers, group interview by Ryan Wadle, Combat Studies Institute, Schofield Barracks, HI, 27 April 2012, 2, 5.

14. Kerins, interview, 5, 7; Scout NCOs, group interview, 5; Heiliger and Puletasi, interview, 3; Heaviland and Simmons, interview, 7; Hughes and de Lemos, interview, 5.

15. Kerins, interview, 7-9; Alpha Company Non-Commissioned Officers, group interview by Ryan Wadle, Combat Studies Institute, Schofield Barracks, HI, 25 April 2012, 5-6; Heiliger and Puletasi, interview, 7, 22, 29; Heaviland and Simmons, interview, 9.

16. Kerins, interview, 9-10; Scout NCOs, group interview, 6-9.

17. Heiliger and Puletasi, interview, 6-8, 10; Heaviland and Simmons, interview, 13.

18. Heaviland and Simmons, interview, 6, 8-10, 12; Heiliger and Puletasi, interview, 8; Delta Company Non-Commissioned Officers, group interview by Ryan Wadle, Combat Studies Institute, Schofield Barracks, HI, 26 April 2012, 9-13.

19. Heaviland and Simmons, interview, 11-12; Kalaher, interview, 6; Delta NCOs, group interview, 14.

20. Heiliger and Puletasi, interview, 12; Heaviland and Simmons, interview, 14; Charlie NCOs, group interview, 9-13; Kalaher, interview, 6.

21. Kalaher, interview, 8-9; Baca, Van Wyhe, Gaulin, group interview, 11; Captain John Cheatwood and Sergeant First Class Matthew Bartel, interview by Ryan Wadle, Combat Studies Institute, Schofield Barracks, HI, 26 April 2012, 7; Delta NCOs, group interview, 17, 20-21; Charlie NCOs, group interview, 15.

22. Hughes and de Lemos, interview, 2-4; First Lieutenant Colin Brodmerkel, interview by Ryan Wadle, Combat Studies Institute, Schofield Barracks, HI, 25 April 2012, 5.

23. Hughes and de Lemos, interview, 2-3.

24. Hughes and de Lemos, interview, 4, 7-9, 19-20; First Lieutenant Scott Stoppelbein, interview by Ryan Wadle, Combat Studies Institute, Fort Leavenworth, KS, 9 May 2012, 11; Brodmerkel, interview, 2.

25. Hughes and de Lemos, interview, 4, 9.

26. Brodmerkel, interview, 12-14; Bravo Company Non-Commissioned Officers, group interview by Ryan Wadle, Combat Studies Institute, Schofield Barracks, HI, 25 April 2012, 7.

27. Hughes and de Lemos, interview, 10-13; Bravo NCOs, group interview, 7-10.
28. Heiliger and Puletasi, interview, 11-2; Alpha NCOs, group interview, 10; Kerins, interview, 11-12; Scout NCOs, group interview, 12.
29. Hughes and de Lemos, interview, 14-16; Bravo NCOs, 14-17, 19-20.
30. Stoppelbein, interview, 10.
31. Hughes and de Lemos, interview, 14, 18-9; First Lieutenant David Hoffmaster, interview by Ryan Wadle, Combat Studies Institute, Fort Leavenworth, KS, 9 May 2012, 10-11.
32. Hughes and de Lemos, interview, 16.
33. Bravo NCOs, group interview, 11-12.
34. Bravo NCOs, group interview, 12-14.
35. Bravo NCOs, group interview, 13-14, 17-18.
36. Brodmerkel, interview, 15-17; Bravo NCOs, group interview, 23; Hughes and de Lemos, interview, 17.
37. Hughes and de Lemos, interview, 15, 21-22; Hoffmaster, interview, 8-10.
38. Hughes and de Lemos, interview, 17-18; Hoffmaster, interview, 11; Bravo NCOs, group interview, 14.
39. Hughes and de Lemos, interview, 18-19; Bravo NCOs, group interview, 25.
40. Heiliger and Puletasi, interview, 11-12; Kalaher, interview, 7-10; Charlie NCOs, group interview, 16, 18; Baca, Van Wyhe, Gaulin, group interview, 12-13, 5; Staff Sergeant David Miller, 2; Cheatwood and Bartel, interview, 8-9; Delta NCOs, group interview, 28.
41. Kerins, interview, 14-15, 18; Scout NCOs, group interview, 16-17.
42. Baca, Van Wyhe, Gaulin, group interview, 8-9; Charlie NCOs, group interview, 4-17, 19, 27-29.
43. Bluhm and Burnah, interview, 5-6; Kolton, interview, 1.
44. Bluhm and Burnah, interview, 6-7; Focused Targeting Force Non-Commissioned Officers, group interview by Ryan Wadle, Combat Studies Institute, Schofield Barracks, HI, 24 April 2012, 3.
45. Bluhm and Burnah, interview, 8-9; First Lieutenant Nathan Peterson and First Lieutenant Zeke Clayson, interview by Ryan Wadle, Combat Studies Institute, Schofield Barracks, HI, 24 April 2012, 8-9.
46. FTF NCOs, group interview, 5, 7; Bluhm and Burnah, interview, 9-10, 13; Peterson and Clayson, interview, 9.

47. Peterson, quoted in Peterson and Clayson, interview, 9.
48. FTF NCOs, group interview, 5-6; Bluhm and Burnah, interview, 10-11.
49. Bluhm, quoted in Bluhm and Burnah, interview, 12.
50. Bluhm and Burnah, interview, 12.
51. Bluhm and Burnah, interview, 14.
52. Lennox, interview, 16; Bluhm and Burnah, interview, 10, 14-15.
53. Bluhm, quoted in Bluhm and Burnah, interview, 15-16.
54. Bluhm and Burnah, interview, 15-17.
55. Peterson and Clayson, interview, 10-11, 13; Lennox, interview, 17; FTF NCOs, group interview, 9-10.
56. Sergeant Arturo Bedoy, quoted in FTF NCOs, group interview, 7.
57. Peterson and Clayson, interview, 15.
58. Bluhm and Burnah, interview, 17-18; Lennox, interview, 18.

Chapter 4

The Battle for the Strongpoints, 26-30 June

As dawn broke over the Watapur Valley on 26 June, the complexion of HAMMER DOWN had changed markedly. What had started as an operation to clear two notoriously insurgent infested villages at the northern end of the valley, instead became a series of static battles for a series of strongpoints on the battlefield. Bravo Company remained pinned down outside the village of Gambir but the remainder of TF *Cacti*'s strongpoints lay along the top of the eastern ridgeline in a north-south line spanning almost seven kilometers in length. During the second day, the operation's emphasis shifted to the north so that all units would directly or indirectly support Bravo Company and the FTF. This refocusing on the strongpoints, while certainly affecting the battle's outcome, put the battalion's logistical network under great strain. Moreover, the lengthening of the operation from 48 hours to six days and the variable weather patterns caused by the high elevations would tax both man and machine.

26 June, Shifting Forces

Overnight, the men of Bravo Company's 1st Platoon built up fighting positions around the *qalat* they had occupied during the ambush, a location they now called Strongpoint Bastard. A pair of insurgents attempted to approach the position in the darkness but the American thermal equipment spotted them on their approach and they were killed. The rest of the night, however, found the men of Bravo Company recovering from the firefight. Under orders from Lieutenant Colonel Tuley, Captain Hughes was evacuated after turning over command of the company to his executive officer, Captain Angel Rosario. A later MEDEVAC flight brought out First Lieutenant Hoffmaster and the body of First Lieutenant Dimitri del Castillo. First Lieutenant Brodmerkel successfully led the 2d Platoon to the strongpoint during a nighttime movement, arriving at 0300 just before daybreak. Brodmerkel's Soldiers reinforced the tired and dazed men of the 1st Platoon, and the 20 to 25 sandbags that each carried in their rucksacks helped strengthen the fighting positions around the *qalat*. Lieutenant Mossberg attempted to move the 3d Platoon to Strongpoint Bastard as well but one of the senior NCOs had twisted his ankle severely enough to require a MEDEVAC request. By the time the helicopter arrived well after daybreak, 3d Platoon had cancelled its movement.¹

Three kilometers away up the ridgeline at HLZ Honey Eater, the FTF likewise spent the night establishing fighting positions and recovering from its own ordeal. With only 47 Soldiers, the FTF occupied a perimeter 500 meters wide around the Chinook crash site and the rest of HLZ Honey Eater.² The terrain facilitated a strong defense but the men of the FTF

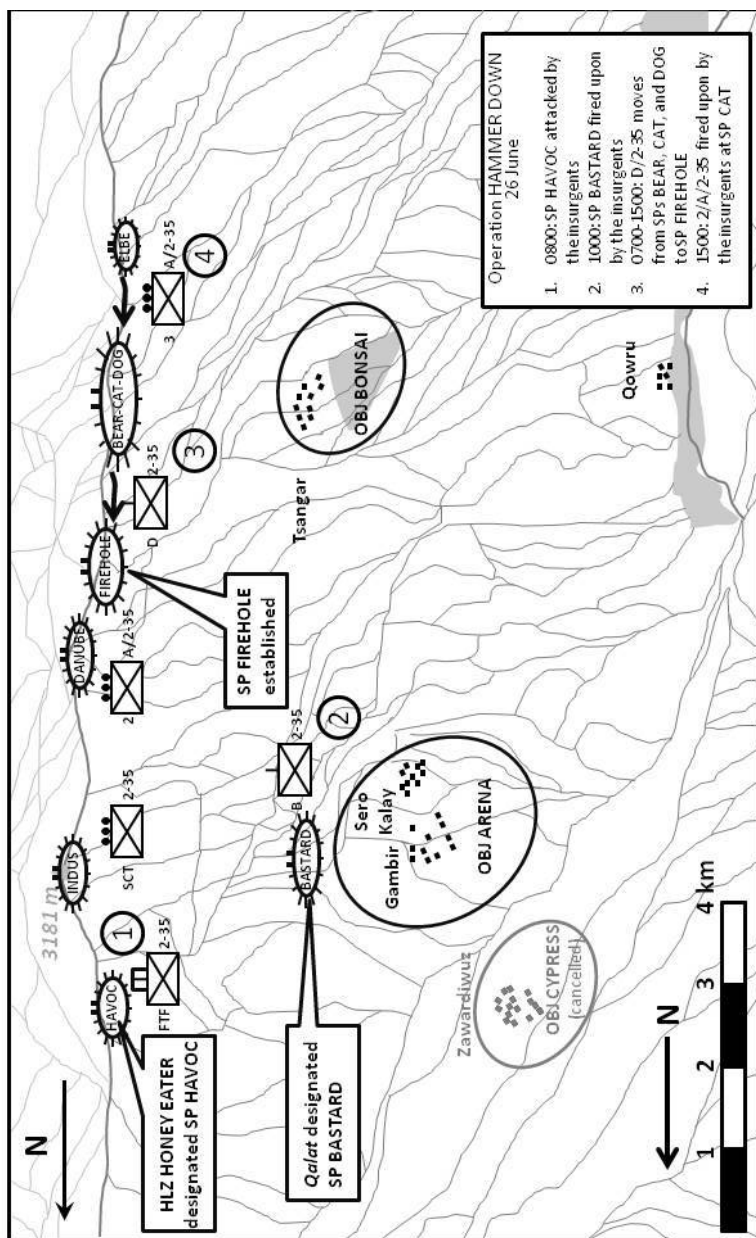


Figure 11: Operation HAMMER DOWN, 26 June 2011.

Source: author/CSI generated.

worried about the small numbers of personnel securing such a large perimeter in an area that First Sergeant Burnah referred to as, “the Alps, just with bad neighbors.”³ The north side of the perimeter faced a trafficable draw, requiring a strong security presence from Peterson’s 1st Platoon (designated FTF1). The Afghan Army units dug in on several rocky

outcroppings on the west side of the perimeter, while the bulk of First Lieutenant Campbell's 2d Platoon (FTF2) guarded the southern end of the strongpoint. In these sectors, six to eight Soldiers often had responsibility for 200 meters of the perimeter.⁴

Throughout the night and into the morning, Bluhm remained in close contact with the battalion TAC and prepared part of his force to continue its relief mission to Strongpoint Bastard. Many of the FTF's wounded Soldiers remained at HLZ Honey Eater, now referred to as Strongpoint Havoc, because they could not traverse the rough terrain between the HLZ and Gambir. Captain Bluhm, the force commander, would remain at Honey Eater while First Lieutenant Peterson would lead a platoon-size force down the ridgeline to reinforce Strongpoint Bastard. Just minutes before their 0800 departure, squad leader Sergeant Kyle Moreno spotted several men moving along the ridgeline approximately 100 meters outside the perimeter. Moreno and one of his men conducted a recon and security patrol to gather more information but their search revealed nothing and they returned to the strongpoint. Soon afterwards, the platoon left the perimeter, but after walking only 20 meters, eight RPG rounds streaked out of the northern wood line towards Strongpoint Havoc. Because the insurgents fired uphill, the rockets hit the trees above the Coalition positions but they forced everyone to take cover. The insurgents followed up with AK-47 and PKM fire. Moreno saw eight insurgents moving toward the northwest corner of the perimeter and fired M320 grenade rounds in their path. These enemy fighters, however, remained undeterred by the 40mm grenades and shifted their fire to the northeast corner of the strongpoint toward Sergeant David Sherlock's squad. This complex and disciplined direct fire attack, previously seen by other American units in the Watapur area, demonstrated that there were still well trained enemy forces in the valley willing to fight. The Coalition firepower advantage carried the day as machine guns, M320s, and 60mm mortars forced the enemy to withdraw. The brief firefight surely alerted any insurgents in the area not yet aware of the Coalition presence. As a result, the battalion cancelled the FTF's movement to Strongpoint Bastard and First Lieutenant Peterson's element remained in the perimeter.⁵

At this point in the battle, all Lieutenant Colonel Tuley could do to reinforce Strongpoint Bastard was to consolidate the entire company on the position. The earlier arrival of Brodmerkel's 2d Platoon certainly added to the security presence and greatly reduced the friendly fire risk in the rough terrain. Despite the increased force and the mission to clear Gambir, Bravo Company remained at the strongpoint on 26 June. The

company continued to occupy the *qalat*, occasionally interacting with the elderly man who owned the dwelling. The insurgents tested the defenses at 1000 that morning with RPGs and machine guns. Bravo Company's organic firepower and available support made the enemy quickly break off their fires, but some men found their positions particularly uncomfortable. Sergeant Kaaekuahiwi and Sergeant Olney occupied a point along the perimeter near several beehives. Unfortunately for them, the insurgents' RPGs enraged the bees, giving the Soldiers an added distraction during the firefights.⁶

Due to the precarious situation at Strongpoint Bastard, Tuley revised the operation's overall objectives. Of all of his subordinate units, Delta Company was affected the most. Overnight, the battalion commander cancelled the company's clearance of Tsangar and ordered Captain Kalaher to move his unit to a new position, Strongpoint Firehole, located approximately one kilometer to the north of Strongpoint Bear. From the new position, Delta Company could better interdict insurgent forces attempting to cross the ridgeline and attack Strongpoint Bastard outside Gambir. Kalaher had intended to use the darkness to mask his movement but the hot temperatures of nearly 100 degrees Fahrenheit recorded at the high altitudes, surprised the Soldiers and caused them to consume their water at a higher rate. Before setting out, Kalaher waited to receive a resupply of water but no helicopters could fulfill the resupply request. At approximately 0700, the three platoons under Kalaher's command were forced to begin their move to the new position.⁷

First Lieutenant Simmons' platoon from Alpha Company at Strongpoint Elbe also received orders to move during the second day. Strongpoint Elbe had received no enemy contact during the first day of fighting as nearly all of the enemy activity focused on Gambir and the northern part of the battlespace. Moreover, no intelligence collected by LLVI or other sources suggested that insurgents were in that area. With Delta Company's clearance of Tsangar cancelled, Tuley ordered Simmons' troops to reinforce Strongpoint Danube farther north. To facilitate his platoon's movement northward, Simmons coordinated with Captain Kalaher, the commander of Delta Company. Since Simmons' platoon had a longer distance to travel, Kalaher intended for the unit to pass through his unit's lines and push ahead of his three platoons.⁸ As Delta Company and Simmons' platoon began their movement, the level of insurgent activity increased on the ridgeline. Intercepted communications now revealed that the enemy had detected the Coalition force and intended to strike. For several hours, however, no enemy attack materialized.

Meanwhile, the situation for the Scouts at Strongpoint Indus and Alpha Company at Strongpoint Danube remained quiet throughout 26 June. However, both units began to observe hostile movement near their strongpoints. The Scout Platoon, as part of its standard equipment load, had carried enhanced optical equipment including stabilized binoculars and Long Range Thermal Video imagers that greatly enhanced their ability to monitor the surrounding terrain. At approximately 1200, Specialist Calvin Smackey used the equipment to spot five insurgents moving through open terrain to the south of Strongpoint Indus, only 500 meters from Strongpoint Danube. Further examination by Sergeant Galloway, identified that two of the insurgents were carrying a third wounded man. The Scouts' Air Force JTAC called in a CAS strike that arrived 15 minutes later, killing at least two of the insurgents.⁹

At Strongpoint Danube, Alpha Company used information from the LLVI team to identify a suspected eight-man insurgent force armed with RPGs moving along the west side of the perimeter. First Lieutenant Heaviland led a squad-sized patrol of Americans and Afghans down the ridgeline to spring an ambush on the insurgents but the enemy force never materialized. Since the patrol had already left the perimeter of the strongpoint, Captain Heiliger ordered Heaviland to move his element to the south side of Strongpoint Danube to await a linkup with Simmons' platoon. As they waited for their comrades to arrive at the strongpoint, a series of fierce firefights developed on the ridgeline.¹⁰

During the mid-afternoon, the enemy became very active and aggressive. A small insurgent fire team probed the defenses of Strongpoint Havoc, only to be driven away by the FTF's weapons. Most of the contact that afternoon took place farther to the south. By 1500, some of Kalaher's lead elements had reached Strongpoint Firehole with the rest of the company spread out as far back as Strongpoint Cat where Simmons' platoon was currently located. Then, Simmons' platoon left Strongpoint Cat and started to move northward toward Strongpoint Danube. First Lieutenant Tyler Martin's platoon, attached to Delta Company, had assumed a position on a hilltop to the north of Strongpoint Cat to overwatch Simmons' movement during the first leg of their trek. Almost simultaneously, the threatened insurgent attack materialized. The enemy had moved onto the top of the ridgeline and fired on the spread out Coalition force. Staff Sergeant Jason Felton's 60mm mortar squad began engaging insurgent positions.¹¹

As this firefight started, Sergeant Jason Grammo from Martin's platoon heard voices and saw two groups totaling eight insurgents moving into the recently vacated Strongpoint Cat. Instead of moving

up the western side of the ridge as the previous day's enemy force had done, these fighters had scaled the seemingly impassible cliffs on the eastern side of the ridge from the Chigal Valley. They were also dressed differently than their predecessors. Instead of the local dress common to many fighters, these insurgents wore red turbans and camouflage similar to the American multicam pattern, making it possible for the Americans to confuse the enemy fighters with the members of ANA units. The insurgents quickly established a defensive position on the hilltop and opened fire on Simmons' platoon with AK-47 assault rifles and a PKM machine gun. The accidental but fortuitous timing of the insurgent assault on Strongpoint Cat allowed the enemy to seize key terrain and catch the American platoon in the open.¹²

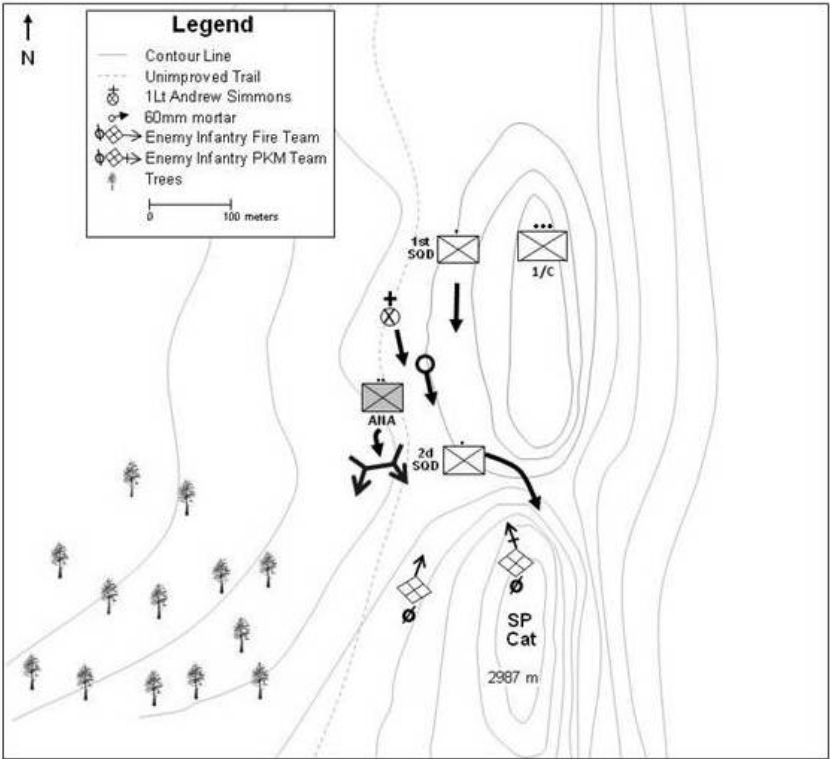


Figure 12: The Situation Upon Enemy Contact, 1st Platoon, Charlie Company. 1500, 26 June 2011.

Source: author/CSI generated.

When the enemy opened fire, Simmons halted his platoon and immediately shifted his men to oppose the new threat that had materialized to their rear. In order to neutralize the insurgent fires and retake the hilltop,

he split his force into three separate maneuver elements. First, he directed the attached Afghan Army platoon to assume a support-by-fire position, directing its three machine guns on the enemy position. Next, Simmons told Sergeant Faldherbe Richelieu's 2d Squad to move and secure the left flank, taking up a position between Strongpoint Cat and the hilltop occupied by Martin's platoon. Third, the platoon leader had Staff Sergeant Antwain Robinson's 1st Squad, which had moved the farthest from the strongpoint, to retrace its steps to assist the 2d Squad in an assault. That assault began with Simmons also using his 60mm mortar squad near the Afghan Army unit to provide additional fire support.¹³

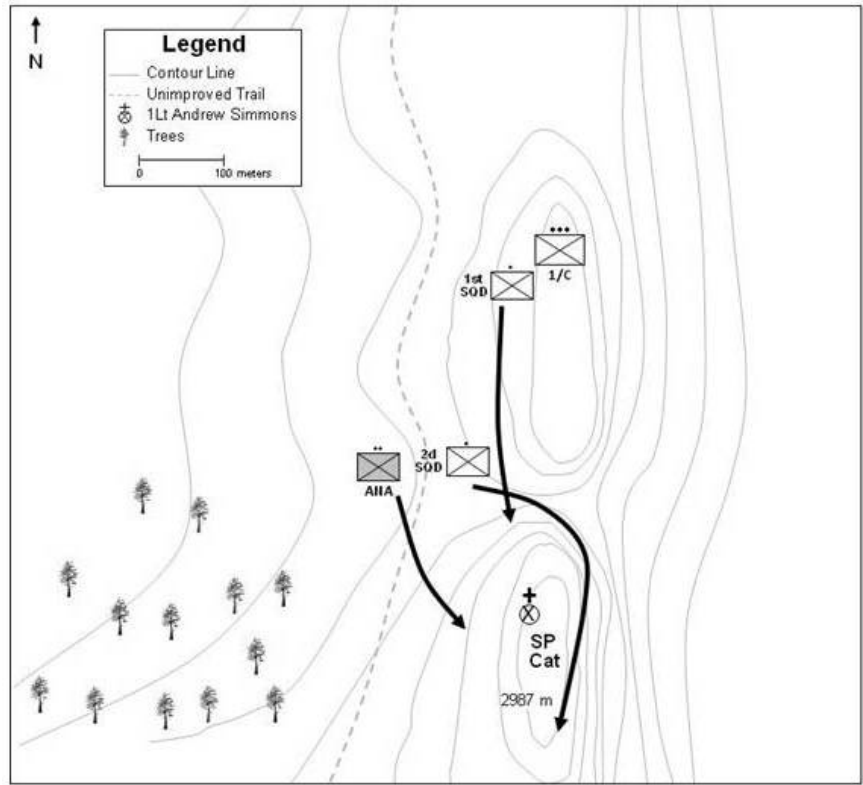


Figure 13: The Retaking of Strongpoint Cat, 1500, 26 June 2011.

Source: author/CSI generated.

The 3d Platoon conducted its attack primarily relying on organic weapons with little outside support. Martin's platoon provided some limited fire support but was cautious in its fires in order to avoid any possibility of fratricide. Martin's RTO tried to obtain fire support from OH-58D Kiowa Warriors but there were none available at the time.

Undeterred by the enemy fire, Simmons and his RTO moved to join the 2d Squad as it assaulted the crest of the hill. While Sergeant Richelieu's teams advanced, Specialist Kevin Hilaman took cover at the base of a pine tree 30 meters from the insurgent positions. The tree unfortunately provided inadequate protection. Multiple rounds struck Hilaman in the neck and chest. Almost immediately, the platoon sergeant, Sergeant First Class Dominador Rubang and the platoon medic, Private First Class Conway, went to Hilaman's position and began to treat his wounds. The rest of the 2d Squad cleared the summit, finding two dead insurgents and recovering the insurgent commander's phone book that contained information on dozens of insurgent fighters. The surviving enemy fled into the wood line to the west and southwest of the hilltop.¹⁴

With this fight over, the emphasis shifted towards treating the casualties. At some point during the fight, a bullet had pierced Staff Sergeant Daniel Charette's shoulder but he remained unaware of the wound for several hours. A MEDEVAC helicopter soon arrived and lowered its medic to the ground to aid in the treatment of Hilaman. Before the wounded man could be evacuated, however, enemy small arms fire from the trees to the west forced the helicopter to depart, leaving the medic behind. With Kiowas now on station, Simmons directed gun runs on the enemy positions, killing two more insurgents. Unfortunately, Specialist Hilaman's wounds proved too severe and he succumbed on the battlefield. Due to the exertions of the firefight, Major Wright at the TAC at Honaker-Miracle ordered Simmons to remain at his present position and postpone the rendezvous at Strongpoint Danube.¹⁵

By dusk on 26 June, the battlefield had become quiet. Delta Company had reached Strongpoint Firehole and prepared fighting positions. Sometime after First Lieutenant Simmons' fight on the ridgeline, the enemy fired on Strongpoint Bastard for a second time that day, again relying heavily upon machine guns and RPGs. As with the morning engagement, the company drove off the insurgents, suffering only one WIA when a bullet ricocheted into Staff Sergeant Urbonavicius thigh.¹⁶

Supply shortages threatened to hinder the operation, as TF *Cacti* had repositioned its forces that afternoon. Except for the FTF, every unit had brought 72 hours worth of the most essential supplies: water, food, and ammunition. The high altitude, day-night temperature variations as extreme as 60 degrees, and the high operating tempo all combined to use up supplies faster than anticipated. Some of the companies also began to run low on batteries needed to power radios and other essential gear.¹⁷

Exacerbating the logistical situation was the almost total dependence on CH-47 Chinooks to deliver the needed supplies. The difficulties experienced in reaching the high-altitude HLZs on the first day and the crashed helicopter on the night of 25 June illustrated the challenges of flying in support of HAMMER DOWN. Weather now also began to affect the supply situation. The venerable Chinook, the earliest variants of which first entered Army service in the mid-1960s, served as the backbone of Army aviation transportation support during the Coalition campaign in Afghanistan. Their powerful engines allowed the helicopters to reach higher altitudes than many smaller aircraft and their large cargo capacity made them especially useful. TF *Cacti* could ill-afford to lose any of the limited air assets earmarked for the operation. The Chinook crash forced the battalion to request another CH-47 to fill the gap during the operation. Even with the new helicopter on hand, poor weather and a wariness of further missions at high altitude made it difficult for Captain Thomas Campeau, the commander of TF *Cacti*'s Forward Support Company (FSC), and Captain Matthew Webb, the battalion S4 Logistics Officer, to resupply the combat units using planned sling-loads from the Chinooks. Frustratingly for all involved in the resupply efforts, the weather was often "green" or good at FOB Joyce but "red" or poor in the Watapur, forcing the helicopters to remain on the ground.¹⁸

There was a means of delivering supplies in emergency situations. In advance of the operation, TF *Cacti*, like its predecessors in Kunar, had prepared "speedballs" which are body bags filled with supplies protected by Styrofoam. The unit packed each bag to fulfill specific supply needs prior to an operation and required no special equipment for loading and unloading. Unfortunately, the attempts to use speedballs during HAMMER DOWN failed. The smaller UH-60 Blackhawk utility helicopters typically carried the speedballs but dropping them properly required their pilots to hover, a maneuver that required stability and high power. The twin threats of high altitude and insurgent fire led the Blackhawk pilots to make quick, low-level passes over the strongpoints, the crew chiefs kicking the speedballs out the side of the aircraft as it passed overhead. The drops often resulted in broken bags, destroying food and water supplies and damaging precious ammunition.¹⁹

On 26 June, Lieutenant Colonel Joseph Morrow, the commander of TF *Bronco*'s Brigade Special Troops Battalion (BSTB), met with Captain Campeau and Captain Webb and offered a solution to TF *Cacti*'s resupply problems. Morrow proposed using C-23 Sherpa fixed-wing airplanes, designated by the call sign "Slowpoke," to air-drop pallets of essential

supplies. The idea carried much risk because the pilots could not launch their cargo as accurately as the helicopter crews and lacked the ability to communicate directly with Soldiers on the ground. This would also make the airspace in the Watapur, which was already filled with helicopters, fixed-wing aircraft, and artillery rounds, more crowded. In spite of these challenges, the aircraft stood a better chance of dropping the required amounts of supplies than other proposed methods.²⁰

The first attempted Slowpoke supply drop occurred on the afternoon of 26 June. Campeau decided to use Bravo Company's 3d Platoon strongpoint as the test site. First Lieutenant Mossberg received no advance warning of the Slowpoke drop. However, when the aircraft approached, he quickly deduced the aircraft's intentions but could do nothing but watch helplessly as the parachute bundles fell to the ground more than 500 meters from the platoon. Anytime one of his Soldiers attempted to leave the position, he attracted enemy fire, and the supplies remained unrecovered.²¹

Despite such failures, the supply situation had yet to reach critical levels by the end of 26 June. Unfortunately, the fog that night prohibited any helicopter resupply and Campeau and Webb decided to press the Slowpokes into action yet again the next day. Without supplies, the operation could fail.

27 June, Defending the Strongpoints

By dawn on 27 June, all four of TF *Cacti*'s maneuver companies had safely ensconced themselves inside the protection of their strongpoints. This included First Lieutenant Simmons' 3d Platoon which had rendezvoused with the rest of Alpha Company at 0700 after a four hour long movement from Strongpoint Cat. Captain Heiliger decided to give the weary Soldiers a brief rest at the center of the strongpoint, during which time Staff Sergeant Charette finally discovered the severity of his shoulder wound. Once the men had rested, Captain Heiliger dispatched them to defend the northern side, extending the perimeter northward by 200 meters. This move allowed Alpha Company to cover the high ground just to the north of their position effectively.²²

The civilian exodus from the valley had greatly diminished by 27 June, indicating to TF *Cacti* leaders that the large majority of noncombatants had already left the area. Lieutenant Colonel Tuley told his company commanders that the conditions in the valley had changed. More specifically, he directed them to consider anyone probing the perimeters of their strongpoints as insurgents.²³ This was critical because insurgent activity was on the rise and almost every Coalition strongpoint

reported enemy contacts during the day. Delta Company continued to man Strongpoint Firehole at the southern end of the line of Coalition positions

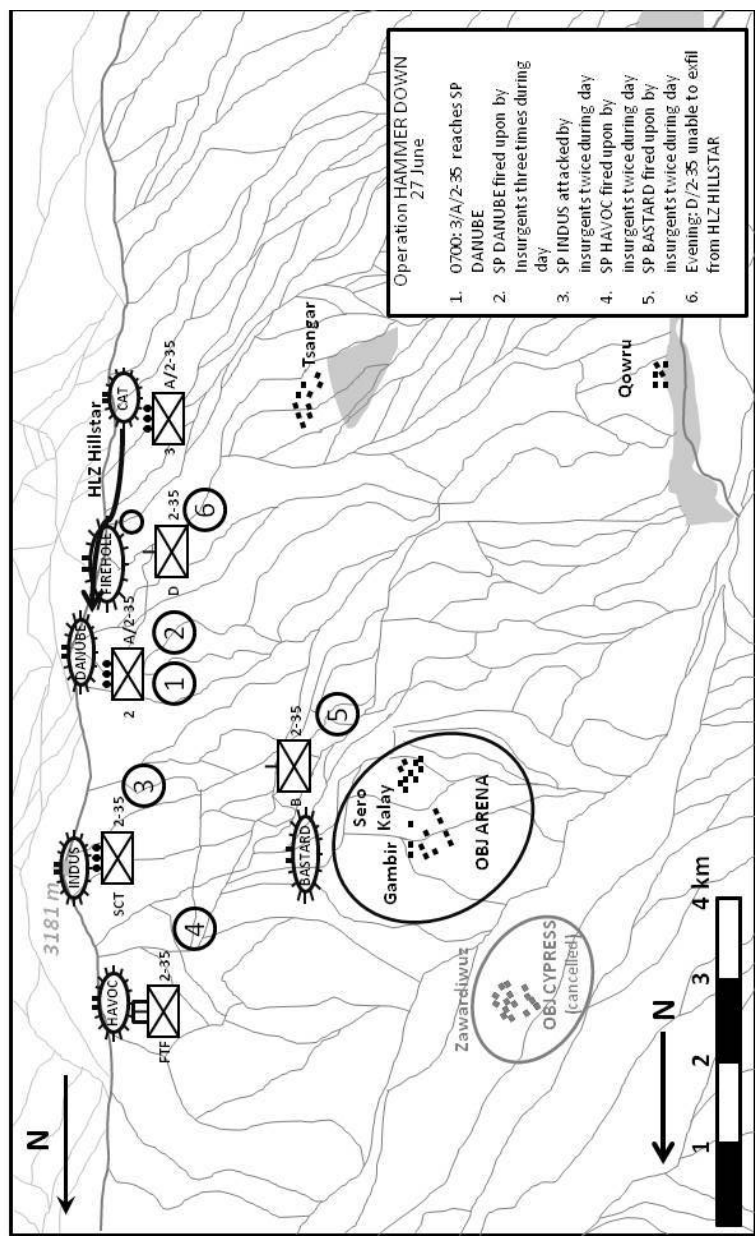


Figure 14: Operation HAMMER DOWN, 27 June 2011.
Source: author/CSI generated.

but the enemy largely ignored that position. American marksmen armed with M14 rifles identified and killed three insurgents to the west of the strongpoint who were moving towards Strongpoint Danube but this was Delta Company’s only contact with the enemy on 27 June.²⁴

The insurgents focused their attacks on the northern positions instead. Enemy fighters attacked Strongpoint Danube on three separate occasions on 27 June. The enemy chose to avoid the northern sector occupied by Simmons' recently arrived platoon, instead directing their attacks on the eastern and western sides of the perimeter. None of the three attacks lasted longer than several minutes and never seriously tested the defenses that Alpha Company had constructed. Still, Captain Heiliger wanted to monitor the approach of insurgents toward the strongpoint. A fire team left the west side of the perimeter to the lower ground beneath the strongpoint in hopes of preventing any surprise attacks on Strongpoint Danube from this direction. The effort proved short lived, however, as the insurgents engaged the fire team with heavy small arms fire, forcing the Soldiers back inside the strongpoint.²⁵

During the night, a thick blanket of fog covered Strongpoint Indus, reducing the Scouts' visibility to only 50 meters. The insurgents used the fog to conceal their movements and attacked the strongpoint early in the morning. Yet again, the enemy force focused on Staff Sergeant Stetzel's position, using RPGs, machine guns, and small arms fire to suppress the American fire. Stetzel's team heard more than saw the insurgents but returned fire and forced the enemy to withdraw back down a goat trail. Captain Kerins, relying upon target reference points fixed during the platoon's first hours at its strongpoint, called in CAS to neutralize the insurgents during their retreat.²⁶

A second enemy force attacked the Scouts during the afternoon. While Staff Sergeant Stetzel's team had taken the brunt of most previous attacks, the insurgents now targeted Sergeant Galloway's position. The position was located near a group of trees and did not provide the same level of cover and concealment as did Stetzel's. An initial volley of RPG rounds suppressed the Americans as fighters moved along a goat trail that snaked through a series of boulders in front of Galloway's position. The squad had an MK 48 7.62mm machine gun trained on the trail and the gunner began firing rapidly, expending nearly 500 rounds, to beat back the attack. Even after 15 minutes of sustained small arms fire and 60mm mortar rounds, the insurgents remained undeterred and continued the fight. Three men, including two Soldiers from the US Army's Asymmetric Warfare Group (AWG) who were present as observers, left their own positions and reinforced Galloway. The enemy advanced to within 25 meters of the position, close enough that the defenders detonated two Claymore mines, while another Soldier began tossing hand grenades at the insurgents. Finally, an RPG gunner from the ANA platoon came over from Staff

Sergeant Brown's sector and fired at the insurgents, causing the enemy to withdraw. Captain Kerins called in an air strike targeted on the insurgent withdrawal route and killed several insurgents. No more attacks fell on Indus that day but two of Staff Sergeant Brown's men later climbed atop the rocks at their position and spotted two armed insurgents in a rock formation approximately 1,500 meters away. Kerins called in his first and only 155mm artillery fire mission of Operation HAMMER DOWN in response and an Air Force F-15 fighter later came in to further suppress the enemy element in the area.²⁷

Several hundred meters north of Strongpoint Indus, the FTF at HLZ Honey Eater had settled into their positions and made the most of their situation. Since the FTF had expected to move quickly into lower elevations, its members had not prepared for the cooler weather found on the ridgelines. Sergeant Bedoy and others initially used gauze from their first aid kits to wrap around their faces. Other men cut up spare pairs of socks and slid them over their arms for the added warmth. Several enterprising men had scavenged the crashed CH-47 for any useful materials, including the helicopter's insulation, which they then stuffed inside of their uniforms. Another Soldier guarding the perimeter had found the bare rock he occupied uncomfortable, so he removed the pilot's seat from the Chinook wreck and set it among the rocks. The men of the FTF took pride in the fact that, by the time the Downed Aircraft Recovery Team (DART) arrived on 28 June, they had already effectively stripped the helicopter.²⁸

The enemy sought to break up the little comfort found by the FTF and attacked HLZ Honey Eater in the morning and again in the afternoon. During the morning, Staff Sergeant David Sherlock checked his men along the northern end of the strongpoint. As he made his rounds, a force of approximately 20 insurgents advanced from the north through a draw facing the American positions. First Lieutenant Peterson had worried he had too few men to adequately defend the large portion of the perimeter for which he was responsible. The M240 machine gun in Sherlock's squad was not in position to fire on the attackers and only two men armed with M4 rifles could initially engage the enemy. From his position on the west side of the perimeter, Sergeant Bedoy could not easily see the insurgents. The insurgent force quickly closed to within hand grenade range of the Coalition positions and pinned down the defenders for the first 30 minutes of the fight. Eventually, the Americans were able to shift positions and bring more firepower to bear. Sergeant Bedoy fired the remainder of his M320 grenade rounds at the enemy, and Private First Class Ruben Valle killed four men with his M14 rifle. Meanwhile, First Sergeant Burnah

directed mortar rounds at the insurgents, and the JTAC, Air Force Staff Sergeant Christopher Beversdorf, called in several air strikes. FTF leaders supervised the redistribution of 40mm rounds and other ammunition from the quiet southern and eastern positions to those under fire. Finally, after a firefight lasting 90 minutes that severely tested the defenders, the enemy force withdrew.²⁹

With the continued enemy attempt to overrun HLZ Honey Eater, the TF *Cacti* commander and staff reached an important conclusion. The intensity of the attacks on both HLZ Honey Eater and Strongpoint Indus had pressured the Scout Platoon and the FTF but the other strongpoints had been largely left alone by the insurgents. Battalion planners realized that HLZ Honey Eater, which did not originally figure as an objective in the operation, lay astride the primary foot trail that insurgents used to transit to and from the Watapur Valley. The eastern slope of the ridgeline facing the Chigal Valley sloped much more gently near Honey Eater, making it a natural crossing point between the two valleys. The top of the ridgeline also continued on to the north into Nuristan. The Chinook's crash had unwittingly placed an American force in position to disrupt the primary enemy line of communication in the northern Watapur Valley. As it became clear that there was a relatively high concentration of enemy forces near HLZ Honey Eater, Kerins received permission from Lieutenant Colonel Tuley to move from Strongpoint Indus to Honey Eater the next night to reinforce the FTF.³⁰

Near Gambir, Strongpoint Bastard came under renewed heavy attack. The insurgents fired RPGs at the Coalition position sending metal and stone fragments into the air and causing Sergeant Olney to briefly rip off his helmet when he thought shrapnel hit his neck. The well-built defenses constructed by the men of Bravo Company over the past two days withstood the barrage, allowing the Soldiers to return fire. The tenacious enemy closed to within hand grenade range of the strongpoint, causing the defenders to set off the Claymore mines emplaced along the perimeter. Some of the insurgents took cover in nearby *qalats* but the Americans had closely watched the structures and observed no civilians inside or nearby. Thus, the insurgents received a nasty surprise when M320 grenade rounds and Light Anti-tank Weapon (LAW) rockets struck the *qalats*.³¹ Bravo Company began inflicting more casualties on their attackers and the insurgents found it much more difficult to gain a positional advantage against the Americans. Bravo Company took great satisfaction from intercepted enemy communications which revealed the insurgents complaining, "We can't move anywhere because they shoot us, they kill us."³²

Amidst all of the fighting during the day, the Forward Supply Company sought to resupply TF *Cacti*. Captain Campeau again relied on the Slowpoke aircraft to drop pallets on multiple strongpoints but none of the loads landed close enough for the Americans to retrieve the supplies safely. In fact, Alpha Company at Strongpoint Danube only learned through communications intercepts that their supplies landed two kilometers to the west of their position and into the hands of the insurgents. The insurgents had hoped the Americans so desperately needed the supplies that they would move off the ridgeline to retrieve the pallets. Captain Heiliger ignored the clumsy attempt to lure the Americans into an ambush and continued to wait for more effective resupply methods.³³

That day, Chinooks from FOB Joyce brought sling loads to Strongpoint Bastard, Strongpoint Indus, and HLZ Honey Eater. During the third resupply run, the pilots flying a Chinook with a sling load became disoriented as they flew through a cloud bank. Rather than risk another crash, the crew jettisoned the load. After this incident, the commander of the aviation unit cancelled the remaining supply runs. After multiple days of aborted missions due to weather in the valley, the supplies began to back up at FOB Joyce. That evening, Captain Campeau, the Forward Support Company commander, emphasized to the TF *Cacti* staff that shortages in food, water, and ammunition might force a premature conclusion to Operation HAMMER DOWN.³⁴

Signs of strain appeared elsewhere on the battlefield. Discipline among the Afghan Army units began to erode noticeably by the end of the third day. The Afghan company partnered with Captain Heiliger's Alpha Company at Strongpoint Danube had an almost complete breakdown in leadership. Heiliger enjoyed good relations with the Afghan company commander but the ANA force included a platoon attached from a different company. As a result, the leader of the attached Afghan platoon refused to follow the orders of the company commander.³⁵

Even Americans who later praised the ANA for their role in the operation noticed that their partner units began to lose effectiveness. Some Soldiers believed that the Afghan units lacked the mental focus and discipline needed to operate for longer than a few days at a time and the supply situation only exacerbated the problem. Delta Company's Afghan partners became restless as the supply of meals-ready-to-eat (MREs) began to run low on 27 June. At one point during the day, a stray goat wandered into the position. Almost in unison, the Afghans left their defensive positions to chase the goat and eventually succeeded in killing and slaughtering the animal. With no regard for the combat conditions,

the Afghans then proceeded to start a large fire to roast the goat meat. The Afghan platoon partnered with First Lieutenant Martin's platoon demanded opium the same day. The Americans, unsurprisingly, declined to add the opium to their resupply requests. Actions such as these did little to endear ANA units to some US Soldiers.³⁶



Figure 15: Bravo Company defending Strongpoint Bastard.

Source: 2-35 Infantry, 25th Infantry Division.

Lieutenant Colonel Tuley, having shifted the battalion's emphasis towards Gambir and cancelling the supporting operation in Tsangar, decided that Delta Company's position at Strongpoint Firehole was no longer necessary and ordered helicopters to pick up Captain Kalaher's unit that night at HLZ Hillstar. The HLZ was positioned 200 meters down a steep incline from the strongpoint. The battalion decided to try and use

the HLZ again because Delta Company had several men suffering from injuries and heat exhaustion who could not move long distances. After dark, the company occupied the HLZ. A Kiowa Warrior inspected the HLZ and declared it suitable but when the Chinook arrived, the pilot refused to land because a large tree sat in the middle of the landing site. Engineers attached to Delta Company tried to blow the tree with C4 plastic explosive but did not have enough of the explosive on hand. Therefore, Delta Company could not leave that night and the men returned to their original fighting positions to wait and try and destroy the tree again the next day.³⁷

28 June, Reinforcements and Consolidation

Early on 28 June, reinforcements finally reached Strongpoint Bastard. First to arrive was the brigade reserve of Bravo Company, 2-27 IN. On a four hour alert since 25 June, Captain Michael Kolton decided to bring only part of his unit: his 2d Platoon, led by First Lieutenant Anthony Ferrara; his 3d Platoon, led by First Lieutenant Jon Brown; and a skeleton headquarters element. No ANA attachments accompanied the company.³⁸

On the evening of 26 June, Kolton's unit was to fly to FOB Joyce to conduct an insertion the next night. Instead, once in the air, the pilots told Kolton that they intended to land his company at HLZ Honey Eater. While the changed mission took Kolton by surprise, poor weather prevented the landings and the company went on to FOB Joyce as initially planned. During the day on 27 June, Kolton acquired grid coordinates and satellite images of the area from the head of the Downed Aircraft Recovery Team, Captain David Fitzgerald. Later, Kolton met with Captain Hughes, recently evacuated from the valley, and gained a fuller picture of the situation at Strongpoint Bastard.³⁹

After catching several hours of sleep, Kolton learned that his company would now land at HLZ Carolina just to the west of Strongpoint Bastard and clear the village of Sero Kalay. The Afghan commandos, held in reserve since the beginning of HAMMER DOWN, would land at the same HLZ just ahead of Bravo, 2-27 IN and clear Gambir. The commandos would operate independently of other units, meaning that Kolton would not have direct command over the Afghans. Because of the NATO requirement that ANA units lead all clearance operations, an Afghan Army platoon was attached to Kolton's command for the mission. His 1st Platoon, left back at COP Monti, found time that day to rigorously train the designated ANA platoon at a facility constructed specifically to prepare forces for clearance missions. The ANA platoon flew from COP Monti to FOB Joyce at 2130 on 27 June. With his complete force now assembled, Kolton loaded men and equipment onto the Chinooks and lifted off for the Watapur.⁴⁰

At 2230, Bravo Company, 2-27 IN disembarked from the helicopters at HLZ Carolina. After a brief meeting between Kolton and a US SOF advisor with the Afghan commandos, the company set out for Strongpoint Bastard. The HLZ Carolina was only 150 meters west of Strongpoint Bastard but a cliff of 50 meters deep separated the two positions. A layer of fog added to the difficulties, making the movement to the strongpoint a two and half hour ordeal.⁴¹

As Kolton's company moved toward Strongpoint Bastard, the 3d Platoon from Bravo Company, 2-35 IN also set out to reinforce the strongpoint. At approximately 2130 hours, the platoon's leader, First Lieutenant Mossberg, ordered his squads to leave their defensive positions and to begin moving in file through the rough terrain. Lieutenant Colonel Tuley and his staff assumed the movement would take two to three hours to complete but midnight came and went with the platoon still not at their destination. At 0100 on 28 June, the 3d Platoon received enemy communications intercepts indicating that the insurgents had spotted their movement and intended to attack it. Helicopters were covering the commandos' clearance of Gambir but the Bravo Company First Sergeant, First Sergeant de Lemos, requested and received an Apache gunship to escort the platoon during his move. An AC-130 gunship also orbited overhead, providing the men with fire support. The enemy threat to Mossberg's platoon never materialized and the unit reached Strongpoint Bastard at 0330 without any contact.⁴²

Once Bravo Company, 2-27 IN also arrived at the strongpoint, Kolton's Soldiers immediately noticed several men with gunshot and shrapnel wounds who had not yet been evacuated. The men of Bravo Company, 2-35 IN initially believed that the new force had arrived to relieve them but Captain Kolton informed them that his unit only planned to remain at Strongpoint Bastard for the day. Kolton resupplied the strongpoint with ammunition and ordered his fresh Soldiers to man the perimeter. The firepower used by Bravo Company, 2-35 IN combined with the insurgent focus on Honey Eater had drawn the enemy away from Strongpoint Bastard. Kolton's company had no contact that day.⁴³

The Afghan commandos entered Gambir on 28 June, finally attaining the operation's primary objective. By the time the Afghans entered the village, most of the residents had fled. Searches yielded only one or two caches of any significance. The insurgents had managed to remove anything of value from the village in advance of the arrival of Coalition forces.⁴⁴

After the helicopter pilots had deemed HLZ Hillstar unusable the night before, Delta Company occupied itself with trying to clear a landing zone so that the Chinooks could safely land that evening. The large tree in the center of the HLZ, however, continued to defy all attempts to bring

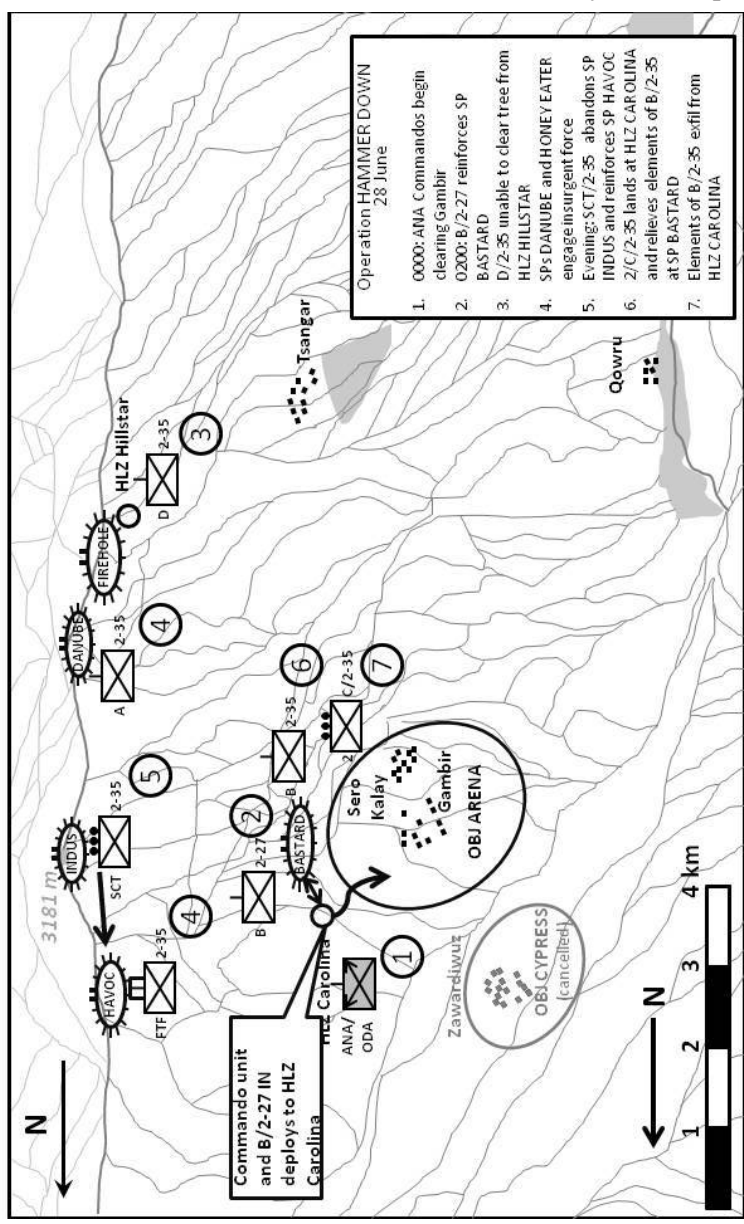


Figure 16: Operation HAMMER DOWN, 28 June 2011.
Source: author/CSI generated.

it down. At one point, a Soldier fired a LAW rocket at the trunk with no effect. The insurgents only complicated matters as small groups of enemy

fighters fired at the men at HLZ Hillstar multiple times. Each time the insurgents attacked, the Americans had to fall back to Strongpoint Firehole because the open terrain around the HLZ lacked any cover or concealment. Delta Company, however, had a major success when the JTAC, Air Force Staff Sergeant Dan Garner, and the Joint Fires Observer (JFO), Sergeant First Class Thomas Manes, identified a foot trail used by enemy fighters on the steep eastern slope of the ridgeline. CAS and artillery rounds fell onto the trail, killing numerous insurgents and deterring the remainder from using the same route.⁴⁵

The amount of enemy contact at the other positions varied widely. The insurgents presumably used a trail that ran along the southern end of Strongpoint Danube to launch three small probing attacks at that position during the morning, at midday, and in the late afternoon, but none of these three attacks seriously tested the defenses of the strongpoint. By contrast, since the Scouts had successfully repulsed every previous enemy attack and then directed artillery rounds and air strikes onto the retreating insurgents, the enemy did not attack Strongpoint Indus on 28 June. Instead, the insurgents continued to probe HLZ Honey Eater, attacking the strongpoint in the morning and then again that afternoon.⁴⁶

The supply situation also began to improve on 28 June for two reasons. First, after the previous failures of the Slowpoke aircraft to deliver their cargo consistently, Captain Campeau demanded better aircraft to perform the task. He happily received support from C-130 cargo planes based at Kandahar equipped with GPS. One of these aircraft delivered a pallet of supplies to Strongpoint Danube, dropping it just outside the perimeter. The supplies allowed Captain Heiliger to distribute two bottles of water, a bottle of Gatorade, and an MRE to each man at the strongpoint. In Heiliger's estimation, the supplies staved off a mutiny by the ANA platoons, still resentful at the Americans for having stopped their feast of roasted goat the day earlier.⁴⁷

Secondly, improved weather finally allowed more Chinooks to fly into the valley and deliver sling loads of supplies to Coalition positions. The Soldiers in the Forward Support Company lengthened the slings so that they better penetrated the thick tree cover in the valley. By this method, the helicopters could bring in supplies, especially ammunition, that might be damaged or that were too important to be included in a pallet drop. The Chinooks and the Slowpokes finally enabled Captain Campeau to supply the operation indefinitely.⁴⁸

TF *Cacti* further consolidated its fighting positions during the night as the Scout Platoon moved from Strongpoint Indus to HLZ Honey Eater. Because the high altitude had prevented any helicopters from landing at Strongpoint Indus or providing any fire support, the Scouts and their Afghan partners had to carry down the body of the Afghan Soldier killed in the first day of fighting. After tearing down their positions and burning their trash with a thermite grenade, the Scouts headed for HLZ Honey Eater. Staff Sergeant Stetzel's team took the point but the steep terrain slowed their movement. The platoon made multiple stops to check its bearings and to give the Afghan soldiers carrying their deceased comrade time to rest. Along the way, the group passed by a rock overhang that showed signs of recent enemy occupation and likely served as an assembly area for insurgent attacks over the previous four days. The Scouts and the Afghans completed their movement without incident and arrived at HLZ Honey Eater before dawn. Once there, the men stocked up on ammunition and reinforced the FTF's fighting positions. While the Scouts had acquitted themselves well at Strongpoint Indus, its members were greatly relieved to have joined forces with the larger FTF.⁴⁹

During the same night, more troops arrived at Strongpoint Bastard. Lieutenant Colonel Tuley had First Sergeant de Lemos lead Bravo Company's 1st Platoon and all other wounded men at the position, to HLZ Carolina for evacuation from the valley. At the southern end of the Watapur Valley, the ANA had assumed full control over the TCP at Shamir Kowtso. The TF *Cacti* thus decided to send First Lieutenant Jarrod McCleary's 2d Platoon, Charlie Company to reinforce Strongpoint Bastard. The movements were coordinated so that the Chinooks landing McCleary's platoon could take de Lemos and the other men out.⁵⁰

First Sergeant de Lemos and 1st Platoon set out at nightfall and encountered, just as Bravo Company had the previous night, the deep gorge that ran between the strongpoint and the HLZ. The platoon reached the clearing at 2200 to find no helicopters there as the Chinooks had landed McCleary's platoon at a clearing farther up the hill. After 15 additional minutes of climbing, Bravo Company's 1st Platoon reached the new pick up point and the helicopters quickly took them away. Meanwhile, McCleary's men moved to the strongpoint, arriving at approximately 0100 on 29 June and had assumed positions on the perimeter by dawn.⁵¹

29 June, Continued Contact and Clearance of Sero Kalay

Late in the night, Captain Kolton's company set out from Strongpoint Bastard to establish a makeshift strongpoint in a farmhouse on the

outskirts of Sero Kalay. From that position, they would prepare clearing the village the following day. During the first hours of the movement, cloud cover prevented any Apache or Kiowa gunships from supporting Bravo Company, greatly worrying the accompanying Afghan platoon. The Afghans, lacking night vision devices and trying to move down a steep incline, refused to move any farther until Kolton allowed them to move from the rear of the formation to just behind the lead element. As the company neared the farmhouse, Kolton, his FSO, and his RTO lost their footing and slid down the slope towards a sheer cliff. Their rucksacks caught on the rocks as they slid, preventing the three men from falling over the cliff. Weather conditions had improved enough for a Kiowa to guide the three men back to the trail while the rest of the company continued on. Just before dawn, Kolton and his men established Strongpoint Baker, and after receiving a load of supplies from a Chinook, conducted the clearance operation.⁵²

At dawn on 29 June, Captain Kalaher, stymied by the tree at HLZ Hillstar, moved his Delta Company from Strongpoint Firehole to HLZ Monarch two kilometers to the south with First Lieutenant Martin's platoon in the lead. No enemy force contested the movement but they came upon a pair of men with donkeys carrying supplies and let them pass. The company arrived at the old Strongpoint Dog position overlooking the HLZ later that morning.

Captain Heiliger's Alpha Company also received orders to move to HLZ Monarch for extraction. That same morning, they left Strongpoint Danube and followed the same trail south toward the HLZ. Unlike the movement of Delta Company, the shift of Alpha Company did not occur without incident. Heiliger split his force into three elements to move along the ridgeline using bounding overwatch. As First Lieutenant Heaviland's platoon moved forward, it encountered the two men that Delta Company had let pass. When questioned, the men claimed to be carrying several weeks' worth of food and supplies for their families. Heaviland's Afghan platoon discounted the story, noting that civilians with nothing to hide had no reason to traverse the top of the ridgelines in this manner. The ANA soldiers suspected that the two men were transporting drugs, heroin most likely, but lacked cause to detain them. Reluctantly, Heaviland's Soldiers let the two men and their donkey continue on their journey.⁵³

Soon after the civilians disappeared from sight, a small group of insurgents started firing at Heiliger's 2d Platoon at the rear of the column. The platoon reacted quickly, returning fire with LAW rockets and M320 grenade rounds. An Apache gunship swiftly appeared over 2d Platoon and conducted several gun runs. This prompt application of firepower suppressed and dispersed the enemy fighters, allowing the company to

continue its southbound movement. Simmons' 3d Platoon also engaged insurgents during the movement, firing at a small enemy force on the eastern slope of the ridge that had used folds in the terrain to provide cover and concealment. The platoon neutralized the insurgent elements and Alpha Company eventually reached the old Strongpoint Cat and established a hasty defense.⁵⁴

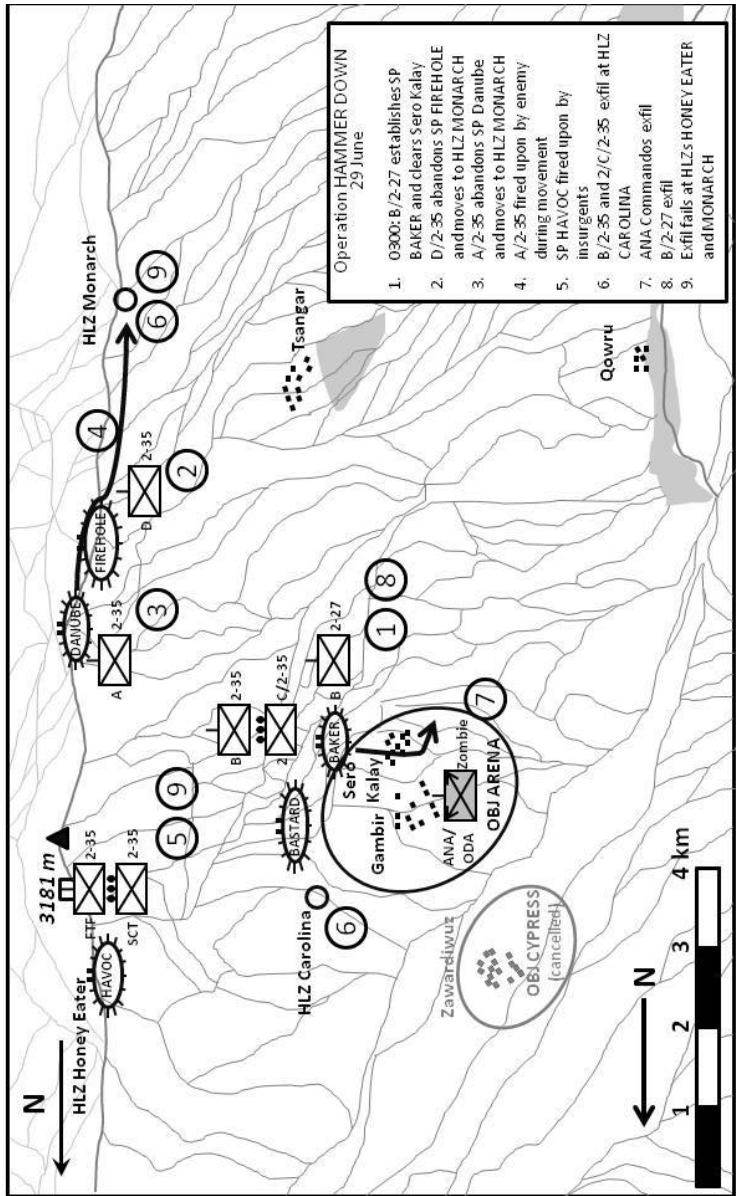


Figure 17: Operation HAMMER DOWN, 29 June 2011.

Source: author/CSI generated.

At roughly the same time, a group of insurgents most likely from Tsangar fired on Strongpoint Baker from 600 meters to the south. Captain Kolton's force engaged the enemy with machine gun and sniper fire and ultimately called in CAS that destroyed the fighters. Nearby, the men at Strongpoint Bastard only encountered sporadic contact with the enemy. Snipers began firing on the position just after dawn but ceased once McCleary's men responded with M320 grenade rounds. Later in the day, more snipers fired at the strongpoint but CAS ended the harassment.⁵⁵

Early that morning at HLZ Honey Eater, an element from the DART team tasked with taking out all of the sensitive equipment from the crashed Chinook helicopter arrived. Led by Staff Sergeant Bryce Venom, the five-man team brought buzz saws, axes, and other tools to remove the communications gear, laser-tracking gear, and anything else that could not be allowed to fall into enemy hands. The task took several hours to complete and made a terrible racket, much to the consternation of the FTF members defending the HLZ.⁵⁶

Out on the perimeter of the HLZ, the scout platoon's LLVI equipment and enhanced optics gave the FTF enhanced situational awareness. That awareness in fact gave the Scout Platoon early warning of a major insurgent attack on HLZ Honey Eater on the morning of 29 June. Communications intercepts indicated that the insurgents had finally realized there was a crashed Chinook at HLZ Honey Eater and had started massing forces to capture the wreckage. In the intercepts, the enemy began discussing a weapon they referred to as "the big one," leading to some concern among the men of the FTF. The "big one" turned out to be a large, homemade rocket. The rocket lacked an aiming system and when fired, exploded 50 meters from Sergeant Bedoy's position but harmed no one. The insurgents also used mortars in the attack and some rounds struck very close to the CP at the center of the position but ultimately, the enemy indirect fire was ineffective.

This show of insurgent firepower did not deter the FTF which responded with its organic weapons systems and some 15 CAS missions during the fight. That fire support successfully drove off the insurgents. A short time later, Major General Volesky briefly visited the strongpoint. His helicopter drew more enemy fire to HLZ Honey Eater. Captain Bluhm then coordinated for several additional CAS missions to destroy the insurgent force, including a strike called against a group of armed men inspecting previous US positions atop Hill 3181.⁵⁷

At mid-afternoon, Strongpoint Dog came under attack by an enemy force using high ground just to the south of the strongpoint. Yet again, the

insurgents used hitherto unseen foot trails on the east side of the ridge to move into position. Delta Company responded with mortars and 40mm rounds and Captain Kalaher called in 155mm artillery to hit the trail and the enemy positions. CAS strikes followed up, removing the threat of the insurgent force. Delta Company suffered one of its few casualties during the operation, a wounded Afghan Soldier who was quickly airlifted to the hospital.⁵⁸

During the afternoon, Bravo Company, 2-27 IN left the confines of their strongpoint and conducted the clearance of Sero Kalay. Kolton ordered his marksmen to set up atop high ground north of the village and provide overwatch as the rest of the company cleared through the settlement. The marksmen killed an enemy crew attempting to fire a DShK 14.5mm heavy machine gun at a Chinook making a supply run but otherwise made no contact with the enemy. Communications intercepts revealed that the insurgents were watching the operation but declined to interfere. The clearance proceeded smoothly, although the company found no significant caches and narrowly avoided a fratricide incident when a few of the Afghan commandos in Gambir strayed into Bravo Company's field of fire. With the village cleared, the force moved back up the hill toward Strongpoint Baker and waited for extraction.⁵⁹

Exfiltration of the Task Force – The First Attempt

During the afternoon of 29 June, Lieutenant Colonel Tuley decided that the operation had run its course. The commandos and Bravo Company, 2-27 IN had cleared Gambir and Sero Kalay, completing the battalion's decisive operation. With these tasks now accomplished, orders went out to each of the companies and platoons to prepare for exfiltration that night.

After dark, the force at Strongpoint Bastard tore down their fighting positions and prepared to move. They left behind their stocks of water and MREs for the elderly man in the *qalat* but they destroyed their leftover ammunition and other supplies before leaving the strongpoint. A light rain began falling on the men as they moved towards the HLZ, causing some to wonder if the Chinooks would be able to fly into the Watapur that night. Fortunately, the conditions remained acceptable at lower elevations and the helicopters picked up the Soldiers and flew them back to FOB Joyce.⁶⁰

That same night, helicopters withdrew the Afghan commando unit from an HLZ just below Gambir. Once the commandos left, the helicopters returned to pick up Kolton's Bravo Company near their strongpoint outside Sero Kalay. Kolton left behind their mini-HESCO barriers for the locals to salvage but his men destroyed their other remaining supplies before boarding the helicopters. His ANA partners left behind a note and

money in the farmhouse to pay for rice that they had appropriated from the owners during the stay. This simple act paid dividends as the homeowner, surprised by the graciousness of the Afghan Soldiers, made contact with the Afghan National Directorate of Security (NDS) and began providing information on insurgent activities in the area.⁶¹

While the Chinooks successfully retrieved all of the troops at lower elevations, the plan did not work out as well for those occupying the ridgeline strongpoints. As fog descended, the Soldiers of Alpha and Delta Companies waited near HLZ Monarch for the helicopters to arrive. When the weather briefly cleared, a Chinook approached the HLZ. The pilot refused to land however, believing a tree stump in the clearing could damage the helicopter. The helicopter flew away into the darkness. Fog and precipitation resumed soon afterwards, forcing both companies to trudge back up the hill into their fighting positions and wait for another attempt. The thought of spending one more day in the cold and rainy conditions sapped the morale of many men in both companies. Unfortunately, there was no choice but to remain overnight.⁶²

Events unfolded similarly at HLZ Honey Eater farther to the north. At 2200 Captain Bluhm ordered everyone to dismantle their fighting positions and to move into pickup zone posture while waiting for the Chinooks to arrive. Unfortunately, the cloud cover and rain proved thicker and heavier at that altitude, preventing the helicopters from landing. Frustratingly for the cold and wet troops on the HLZ, they could see the helicopters flying near Gambir and Sero Kalay 1,000 meters lower down the ridgeline. The poor weather conditions persisted throughout the night, and at 0200 Bluhm ordered his men to reoccupy their fighting positions. Sergeant Bedoy, a survivor of the Chinook crash, was frustrated to find out they would not leave the ridgeline that night but helped man the perimeter.⁶³

30 June, Ending HAMMER DOWN

On 30 June, the sixth and final day of Operation HAMMER DOWN, TF *Cacti* still had two positions in the Watapur Valley: Alpha and Delta Companies near HLZ Monarch and the FTF and Scouts at HLZ Honey Eater. None of these units expected to be in the field another day but they all remained in position to continue to disrupt insurgent activity in the Watapur.

To enable another day of operations on the ridgeline, aircraft made supply runs to both positions. A Chinook sling load arrived at HLZ Honey Eater that morning after the sunlight drove off the cloud cover. Ammunition was the priority item but the men also received replacement uniforms, the originals reduced to rags by days of combat in the unforgiving terrain.⁶⁴

Alpha and Delta Companies received pallets of supplies dropped by Slowpoke aircraft. One of Delta Company's pallets landed outside the perimeter and proved somewhat difficult to retrieve but the second landed in the center of the position and knocked a Soldier's helmet off his head and down the hillside. Alpha Company's pallets arrived without incident and the new supplies, combined with recovered stocks abandoned by Delta Company during its movement to Strongpoint Firehole three days earlier, gave the Alpha Company Soldiers a small measure of comfort. Several men ingeniously reused the parachutes from the pallets to fashion makeshift tents that some referred to as the "Waianae Projects" after a development found near their home station at Schofield Barracks, Hawaii. Now resupplied, the troops manned their positions and waited.⁶⁵

The Americans knew from communications intercepts that the insurgents lacked the capability to sustain a fight for more than two or three days. Evidently, the enemy's exhaustion from the previous days' exertions limited insurgent actions against the Alpha Company and Delta Company positions. A three-man insurgent team probed Alpha Company's position from a cluster of nearby *qalats* in the woodline. Captain Heiliger dispatched a fire team to root out the enemy force but the insurgents avoided decisive contact. Accordingly, Heiliger called in Apache helicopter gunships that were more successful, killing the insurgents as they attempted to move between buildings. After this small engagement, there was no further enemy contact near HLZ Monarch. Later that day, First Lieutenant Martin and Staff Sergeant Richardson led a small team onto the HLZ with explosives and destroyed the stubborn tree stump. The clearing was now set to receive helicopters.⁶⁶

At Strongpoint Havoc, the forces there likewise fought off a small insurgent band probing the perimeter during the morning. At 1315 that afternoon, however, the Scout Platoon sighted a pair of men with donkeys approaching the southern perimeter. Based on the assessment that no civilians remained in the valley, Sergeant Smith engaged the men, killing one of the donkeys.⁶⁷ Several Soldiers left the perimeter and searched the men, who were the same pair who had wandered through Delta and Alpha Companies' formations the previous day. The Scouts wrote a claim receipt for the donkey and sent the men on their way. Just like Alpha Company's encounter with the men, an insurgent attack soon followed the departure of the two Afghans. The FTF and the Scouts held back this larger assault long enough for 155mm artillery rounds to tear into the insurgents' ranks and force them to withdraw.⁶⁸

Since weather conditions had prevented the planned extraction of the entire battalion on 29 June, the unit adjusted the lift plans to ensure that everyone could get out of the valley that night. To shorten the time between sorties, the Chinooks would land at COP Honaker-Miracle instead of each unit's home outpost. The companies also took precautions to compensate for sudden shifts in the weather and the possibility that the withdrawal might have to be delayed another day. Captain Heiliger arranged his Alpha Company chinks so that the last group scheduled to board had night vision devices, RTO, and the 60mm mortar. If the lift at HLZ Monarch failed, they still had HLZ Dollar Bird just to their south as a potential extraction point.⁶⁹

For Captain Bluhm and the FTF, the situation was not as simple. HLZ Honey Eater was at a higher elevation than HLZ Monarch and much deeper in the Valley. Bluhm also still had several men who, while perfectly capable to defend the perimeter, could not move over long distances due to injuries sustained in the Chinook crash. Rumors circulated among the men that the battalion intended to drop in HESCO barriers and erect a COP at their present position. In actuality, TF *Cacti* ordered Bluhm to lead 40 Soldiers (mostly the Scout Platoon), his JTAC, and a mortar team from HLZ Honey Eater to HLZ Dollar Bird if the weather deteriorated during the extraction operation. Approximately eight kilometers of rough terrain and hostiles separate the two HLZs, but the battalion preferred that the troops make the grueling walk rather than remain at Honey Eater at the mercy of the poor weather.⁷⁰

These contingency plans were fortunately unnecessary. The battalion scheduled the Chinooks to pick up the FTF and Scouts first and the operation proceeded relatively smoothly. It took six trips with 20 men aboard each helicopter to lift out the forces at HLZ Honey Eater. First Sergeant Burnah accounted for every man as each boarded the helicopter. A few tense moments occurred as the Apache gunships covering the extraction fired on a small group of insurgents moving towards the north side of the HLZ. The last chink waited on the HLZ without air cover for a Chinook to return but boarded the last helicopter safely.⁷¹

Before leaving the HLZ, the DART Team set phosphorous grenades aboard the wrecked CH-47 to burn out the fuselage. Even still, the Coalition did not want to take any chances with the downed helicopter. After exiting his helicopter at COP Honaker-Miracle, Bluhm and several of his men stood on the helipad and watched in the distance as F-15 jets dropped multiple bombs on the CH-47 crash site, creating a fireball in the night sky. The bombs prevented the insurgents from using the wreck as a propaganda coup.⁷²

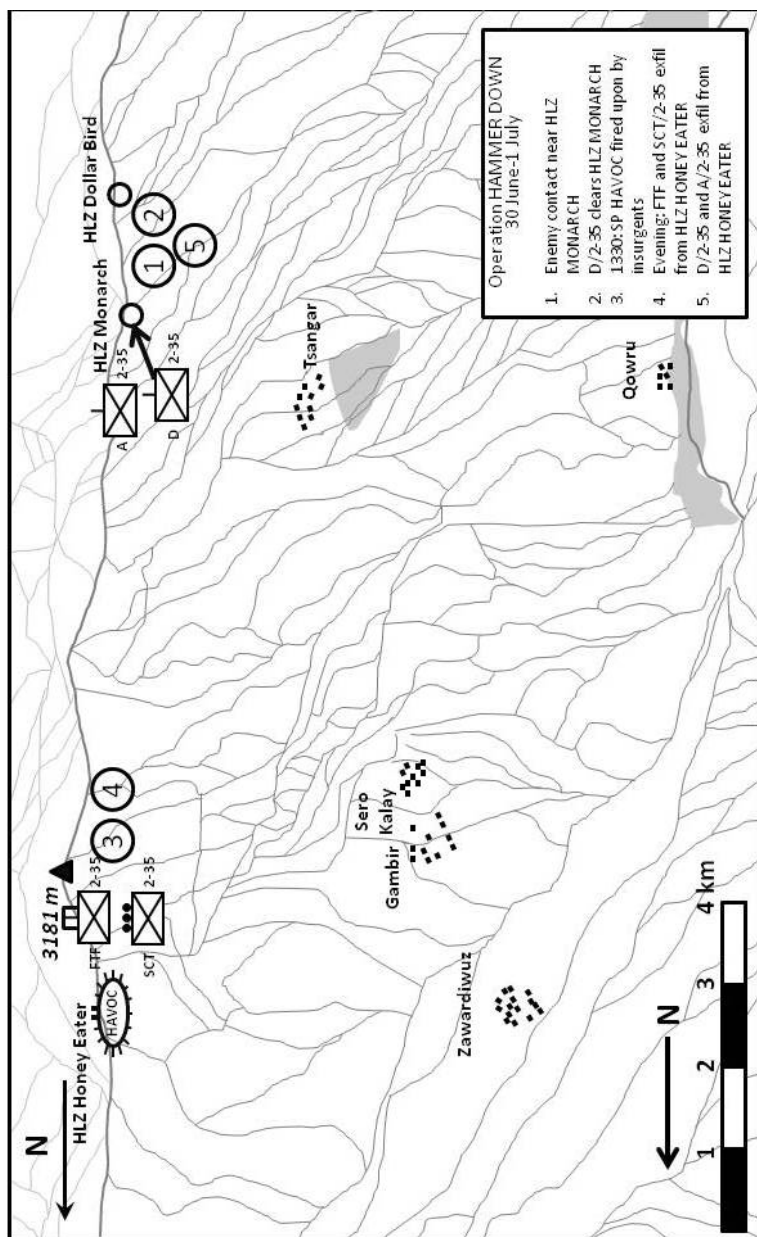


Figure 18: Operation HAMMER DOWN, 30 June 2011.

Source: author/CSI generated.

The withdrawal also proceeded smoothly at HLZ Monarch. Alpha Company and Delta Company had taken positions to the north and south of the HLZ respectively and awaited the Chinooks then lifting out the FTF. At 2230, the last of Delta Company left HLZ Monarch but not before the JTAC called in a CAS mission to suppress a small group of fighters

who had advanced too close to the HLZ. The Chinooks then returned and brought out Heiliger's Alpha Company. Most of the company stood and watched the bombing of HLZ Honey Eater in the distance as they boarded the CH-47s. Just after midnight on 1 July, the last helicopter carrying Heiliger and several of his troops landed at Honaker-Miracle. With the exit of the last of the Coalition forces from the Watapur, Operation HAMMER DOWN ended.⁷³

Endnotes

1. Hughes and de Lemos, interview, 20; Hoffmaster, interview, 11-14; Brodmerkel, interview, 17-18.
2. Bluhm and Burnah, interview, 18; FTF NCOs, group interview, 9-10.
3. Burnah, quoted in Bluhm and Burnah, interview, 26.
4. Peterson and Clayson, interview, 13-14.
5. Lennox, interview, 20-1; Peterson and Clayson, interview, 16; FTF NCOs, group interview, 11-3; Bluhm and Burnah, interview, 18-19.
6. Brodmerkel, interview, 19-20; Bravo NCOs, group interview, 25-26.
7. Kalaher, interview, 10-13.
8. Heiliger and Puletasi, interview, 12-13; Heaviland and Simmons, interview, 16-18, 22.
9. Kerins, interview, 17-8; Scout NCOs, group interview, 20-21.
10. Heaviland and Simmons, interview, 21.
11. Lennox, interview, 23; Kalaher, interview, 12-13; Baca, Van Wyhe, Gaulin, group interview, 17-19; Staff Sergeant David Miller, 3-4.
12. Charlie NCOs, group interview, 23-24; Heaviland and Simmons, interview, 18.
13. First Lieutenant Andrew Simmons, e-mail message to Ryan Wadle, Combat Studies Institute, 13 July 2012; First Lieutenant Andrew Simmons, e-mail message to Ryan Wadle, Combat Studies Institute, 9 August 2012.
14. Alpha NCOs, group interview, 11-12; 1LT Andrew Simmons, e-mail message to Ryan Wadle, Combat Studies Institute, 27 July 2012; Heaviland and Simmons, interview, 18-19; Delta NCOs, group interview, 24-25, 33; Simmons, e-mail, 9 August 2012.
15. Delta NCOs, group interview, 30-31; Heaviland and Simmons, interview, 19; Simmons, e-mail, 9 August 2012.
16. Bravo NCOs, group interview, 29.
17. Cheatwood and Bartel, interview, 10-11; Staff Sergeant David Miller, 3; Baca, Van Wyhe, Gaulin, group interview, 17; Hughes and de Lemos, interview, 5-6.
18. Captain Thomas Campeau, interview by Ryan Wadle, Combat Studies Institute, Fort Leavenworth, KS, 9 May 2012, 14-15, 18.
19. Sergeant First Class Ronald Strietzel, interview by Ryan Wadle, Combat Studies Institute, Fort Leavenworth, KS, 3 April 2012, 10; 2-35 IN Logistics, group interview by Ryan Wadle, Combat Studies Institute, Fort Leavenworth, KS, 24 April 2012, 20.

20. Campeau, interview, 15-17; 2-34 IN Logistics, group interview, 20.
21. Captain Thomas Campeau, e-mail message to Ryan Wadle, 14 August 2012.
22. Heaviland and Simmons, interview, 14, 20-21; Heiliger and Puletasi, interview, 14-15; Alpha NCOs, group interview, 15.
23. Heaviland and Simmons, interview, 26; Bravo NCOs, group interview, 27-28.
24. Staff Sergeant David Miller, 4.
25. Heiliger and Puletasi, interview, 19-20, 26; Heaviland and Simmons, interview, 23.
26. Kerins, interview, 19-20.
27. Kerins, interview, 21-22, 24, 26.
28. FTF NCOs, group interview, 20, 24-25.
29. FTF NCOs, group interview, 17-21; Peterson and Clayson, interview, 21-2, Lennox, 26.
30. Kerins, interview, 24-25.
31. Bravo NCOs, 26-29.
32. Hawkins, quoted in Bravo NCOs, group interview, 27.
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Chapter 5

Conclusion

Many of the Soldiers of TF *Cacti* believed that the days they spent conducting Operation HAMMER DOWN were the hardest of their year-long tour. According to Delta Company's First Sergeant Matthew Bartel, the operation's six-day length and the high altitude made the operation a severe challenge.¹ An intransigent enemy ready and willing to fight made HAMMER DOWN even more difficult. The most painful result of the combat in this operation was the loss of five Coalition soldiers – of three Americans and two Afghans. Dozens more were wounded or injured, including those on the CH-47 that crashed on second day of the mission.

Still, the men of TF *Cacti* responded well to the adversity. First Lieutenant Andrew Simmons, the leader of 3d Platoon, Alpha Company, recognized how the difficult conditions affected his Soldiers but stated, "I was just proud of everyone."² Because the operation occurred relatively early in the task force's deployment, the hard fight gave the battalion a wealth of experience from which to draw for the remainder of the tour. For leaders new to combat, the challenge of controlling men and understanding a quickly changing situation while under fire was a formative experience. First Lieutenant Colin Brodmerkel, Bravo Company's 2d Platoon Leader, recalled the insurgent ambush on the first day of the operation:

It was very chaotic and that's where I will always remember... when they say in the history books about war is, you know, war is hell and all... officers and NCOs try to control chaos, and that's what it comes down to is war is controlling chaos. And that's what I fully understand now after being in that.³

First Lieutenant Brodmerkel's insight on combat leadership was echoed by many in TF *Cacti* who found the six days of fighting on the dangerous ridgelines of the Watapur Valley physically and mentally exhausting.

HAMMER DOWN would have been a difficult operation even if it had proceeded as planned but few military operations adhere closely to the template created by planners and HAMMER DOWN was no exception. The TF *Cacti* commander and staff originally envisioned a mission focused on eliminating the insurgent threat in the Watapur Valley by clearing the villages of Gambir and Tsangar where they suspected enemy training camps were located. Contact with insurgents was deemed possible but the operation was directed more at the enemy infrastructure than at the insurgents themselves.

Once HAMMER DOWN began, however, the initial objectives became secondary in importance as it became clear that TF *Cacti* had essentially launched an attack against a concentrated force of insurgents, most of whom were willing to stand and fight. While the combat in the valley was arduous, the Coalition force ultimately killed approximately 120 enemy fighters and wounded 50 more, striking a significant blow to the insurgent networks that operated in the region. The clearances of Gambir and Sero Kalay did not yield the expected insurgent leaders, weapons caches, or other infrastructure, partly because Coalition forces were delayed by the fighting on the high ground allowing time for enemy leadership to escape the valley.

Aftermath

Coalition success against the enemy formations on the ridges did interrupt enemy activities in the northern Watapur Valley for months. Perhaps the most important result of HAMMER DOWN's success was that the operation relieved much of the pressure on COP Honaker-Miracle, allowing the planned expansion into the western Pech valley to proceed. Insurgents were able to place harassing fire on the COP during the several weeks that followed the operation but these attacks stopped completely for the last four months of the year.⁴

The combined effects of the operation had other long term effects on the region, introducing discord to the insurgent hierarchies in the area. Key insurgent leaders who had held positions of authority for many years in the Watapur suddenly fell from power after HAMMER DOWN. In at least one instance, an insurgent leader lost face because fighters under his command contributed little to the resistance against TF *Cacti*'s incursion into the valley. This infighting in the insurgent ranks, which lasted through the end of 2011, likely contributed to the end of the attacks on Honaker-Miracle during the same time period.⁵

The success of HAMMER DOWN also paved the way for the battalion to execute Operation DIAMOND HEAD during July and August 2011. During this month-long operation, TF *Cacti* relieved the beleaguered ANA forces in Nangalam, re-established a firm Coalition presence in the western Pech Valley, and secured the length of the Pech River Road from Asadabad to Nangalam. The battalion also moved northward into the Waygal Valley, becoming the first Americans to visit the village of Wanat since the battle there in July 2008.⁶

HAMMER DOWN achieved several key goals and allowed for further successes in the Pech but it did not completely destroy the insurgency in

the Watapur. Intelligence reports indicated that the enemy began rebuilding forces in the Watapur soon after the conclusion of Operation HAMMER DOWN. Fighters entered the valley through the traditional rat lines and established themselves in the same villages that had caused problems for *Cacti* and nearly all of its predecessors: Gambir and Tsangar. The insurgent leadership struggles certainly altered the nature of this resurgence but the insurgency continued throughout the remainder of the *Cacti*'s tour. The Assistant Battalion S2 at the time of HAMMER DOWN, Captain Willard Hayes, noted, "the Watapur [was] the one valley really in the Pech that we thought you can go in there multiple times and it's going to continue to refill."⁷

Any analysis of HAMMER DOWN must also note that the TF *Cacti* leadership did not view large operations as the best solutions to the problems found in the Watapur and Pech valleys. The battalion continued to conduct operations in its AO through the end of 2011 but in the final months of the tour, Lieutenant Colonel Tuley shifted his unit's operational priorities. One of the lessons he and his staff took from HAMMER DOWN and their other major operations was that these missions required a significant amount of time and resources to accomplish. Tuley described the larger effect of these operations on the battalion in the following way:

Each one of these operations, as you well know, it's not just those seven days or those six days, it's the preceding weeks of reforming and rebuilding the teams and getting them set for the operation, the whole nine yards. Post ops - it takes us a week just to dismantle the operation, just to get everybody out and get them back into their FOBs and COPs everywhere and then go through their own small recovery for a couple of days. Then it takes another week for them just to figure out what's going on in their districts and their AOs.⁸

Rather than plan a series of large scale operations, Lieutenant Colonel Tuley and his staff decided to refocus their company teams to designated AOs where they conducted lethal and nonlethal operations to secure their areas and train Afghan security forces. Concentrating on specific AOs allowed for much greater outreach with the local populations and earned dividends for the battalion. The intelligence gathered during the latter phases of the deployment allowed TF *Cacti* to conduct small targeted missions to kill or otherwise neutralize insurgent leaders in its AO. These operations tore into the upper echelons of local and foreign fighter cells in the Pech region in an effort to cause organizational chaos and reduce insurgent operational effectiveness.⁹

The Dynamics of the Battle

In the first ten years of the Coalition's campaign in Afghanistan, the Watapur Valley proved especially difficult to control. Populated by a conservative minority tribal group that historically resisted external influences, the valley served as a gateway through which foreign fighters entered the larger Pech Valley region. Attempts by Coalition forces to conduct lethal and nonlethal operations in the Watapur met with resistance by skilled and determined foes that used the mountainous ground to maximum effect. Only on the valley floor could wheeled vehicles travel safely, any major movements into the surrounding ridgelines required helicopter transport or for Soldiers to move on foot. In a long war waged with limited resources, US forces found it difficult to suppress the insurgency or to prevent the flow of foreign fighters into the valley largely because it was extremely difficult to sustain the immediate effects of any operation, however large.

TF *Cacti* encountered many of the same issues that the units which preceded it had when they entered the valley. The inhospitable landscape directly affected nearly every important aspect of Operation HAMMER DOWN. TF *Cacti* tried to develop new HLZs because the planners believed that the constant reuse of landing zones since 2007 eliminated the possibility of surprise. Some of these new HLZs proved unusable and led several units to immediately alter their scheme of maneuver. The shifts ultimately had little effect on the operation's outcome, and, in the case of the Scout Platoon diverting from Strongpoint Amazon to Strongpoint Indus, unwittingly benefited the operation by placing this force in a more valuable location.

Equally important to the course of the operation was the nature of the terrain between the ridgeline and the valley floor. While the seizure of the high ground was a sound tactical decision, to reach their objectives, TF *Cacti*'s teams were forced to move down and across extremely steep terrain covered with dense forest and broken up by ravines and cliffs. During the planning for HAMMER DOWN, *Cacti*'s staff made assumptions about the terrain and the ability of the task force's units to move at a specific rate. The terrain was far more difficult than expected and not only slowed movement and caused injuries but also hindered maneuver once contact was made with the enemy.

While the terrain posed a significant challenge, Lieutenant Colonel Tuley's bold decision to occupy several strongpoints along a six-kilometer line on the ridge proved vital to the operation's success. Like moths to

flames, the insurgents moved uphill towards well defended positions supported by mortars, artillery, attack helicopters, and close air support. These positions greatly reduced the risk to Coalition personnel; only one of the five Coalition fatalities during the operation lost his life inside an established strongpoint. Most importantly, the strongpoints successfully interdicted insurgent movements during the fight from the Chigal Valley and other nearby communities into the Watapur. The crash of the CH-47 on HLZ Honey Eater on 25 June was transformed into a beneficial accident in its result in a company-size force blocking a key enemy ground line of communication into the Watapur.

Despite the operation's success in directly engaging a major insurgent force on the ridgeline during the six days of HAMMER DOWN, the enemy did disrupt the plan to achieve the original objective of the operation – the clearance of the villages on the valley floor. This was mostly a result of the insurgents' willingness to fight on terrain they knew well. Even though TF *Cacti* had seized many of the dominant terrain features, the enemy still proved adept at exploiting the ground to deadly advantage. The most conspicuous example was the ambush of Bravo Company as it neared Gambir, but this was not the only one. At several points during the operation, the enemy traversed the steep cliff face on the eastern ridgeline facing the neighboring Chigal Valley to attack Coalition forces. This avenue of approach caught Alpha Company's 3d Platoon by surprise on the afternoon of 26 June and the ensuing firefight to expel the insurgents from the dominant terrain resulted in the death of Specialist Kevin Hilaman. A second attempt to use the cliff face as the launch point for an attack proved less successful on 29 June as Alpha Company moved from Strongpoint Danube to HLZ Monarch but the skill of the insurgents in exploiting their home terrain cannot be overlooked.

Operation HAMMER DOWN highlighted short term weaknesses of the insurgents operating in the Watapur but also their long term resilience. The ability of American forces to bring incredible amounts of combat power to bear in the valley wrought havoc on the enemy. After six days of fighting and inflicting heavy casualties on the enemy, the Coalition forces nearly exhausted the insurgents in the valley. While the operation led to significant turnover among key leadership positions within the insurgent networks and resulted in a loss of combat capability for some time afterwards, the networks ultimately re-established themselves. The relationships between the northern Watapur villages and Pakistani-based insurgent groups remained intact and foreign fighters returned to the valley.

The Watapur Valley and COIN

The foreign fighters persisted in the Watapur in spite of seven years of sustained lethal and non-lethal operations by Coalition forces to eliminate them. As developed and practiced in Afghanistan, America's COIN approach required flexibility, adaptability, bountiful resources, and most of all, time and patience. Although the Coalition had committed to operations in the Watapur over a course of six years, the overall effort took a step backward each time a new unit arrived in Kunar Province and had to learn about the people and the land on which they lived. Over the course of this period, even with the Coalition achieving some successes in its COIN effort, the insurgency never entirely disappeared. Moreover, none of the units that had responsibility for the Watapur Valley in this period established a permanent presence in the northern end of the valley . A combat outpost in this area would have been costly in resources, especially troops, but might have had beneficial results.

Operation HAMMER DOWN highlights an important facet of the larger war in Afghanistan that often escapes notice. The popular perception of a COIN campaign is that it is conducted on a local level, with small units living among the people they seek to protect and patrolling an area in a manner akin to a police officer. Local development projects aimed at "winning hearts and minds" solidify relationships between the Soldiers and the people and when successful, separate the populace from the insurgents and build legitimacy for the host nation. The US forces certainly practiced many of these elements in the Pech region but, as the amount of forces on hand expanded, especially in 2009 and after, battalion- and brigade-sized operations reminiscent of conventional warfare became more common. These operations allowed Coalition forces to temporarily reduce security threats to a significant extent. However, as TF *Cacti* discovered, these operations sometimes undermine many of the local initiatives that undergird COIN campaigns.

The ability of the insurgency in the Watapur Valley to come back after HAMMER DOWN raises several interesting questions. First, what could have ensured the elimination of the insurgency in the valley? Every Coalition unit in the region had many areas that required their attention so focusing the lion's share of resources on one valley would have been unwise. A new COP in the northern Watapur would have guaranteed a military presence nearer to Tsangar and Gambir but that would have raised an entirely new set of issues including how to balance the benefits and the risk offered by the base. The 2008 attack on the nascent outpost in Wanat and the 2009 assault on COP Keating suggest that a fortified COP in the northern Watapur would likely have met with strong resistance.

Second, did the insurgency in the Watapur require complete elimination to ensure the attainment of the Coalition objectives, especially the expansion of Afghan governmental influence? Some battalions conspicuously avoided conducting large security operations in the northern valley and instead focused their attention on nonlethal methods of engagement. Meetings with elders, sponsoring economic development projects, and providing medical assistance all provided some limited gains but, like the combat operations in the valley, did not greatly reduce the insurgent presence on their own. In fact, enemy fighters remained active throughout the period under study here and COP Honaker-Miracle took fire consistently since the time of its construction in late 2007. The COP sat near the Pech River Road, the primary mover of people and commerce through the Pech. So long as the COP remained under fire, the road was vulnerable, too.

When faced with these questions, after HAMMER DOWN, the Soldiers of TF *Cacti* adopted a middle ground approach that mixed nonlethal operations with efforts to train their Afghan partners to assume a larger security burden. Doing so allowed the battalion to emphasize focused targeting missions against insurgent leadership that reduced their operational burden and maintained significant pressure on the enemy. This approach built upon years of observed experience acquired by units in the Pech and it met with some success before TF *Cacti* deployed home in spring 2012. Whether or not this effort had any long term effect on the insurgency's hold on the Watapur and Pech valleys remains an open question.

Endnotes

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Glossary

AARs	After Action Reports
ANA	Afghan National Army
AO	Area of Operations
AWG	Asymmetric Warfare Group
CAS	Close Air Support
CERP	Commander's Emergency Response Program
COIN	Counterinsurgency
CP	Command Post
DART	Downed Aircraft Recovery Team
ETT	Embedded Training Team
FOB	Forward Operating Base
FSB	Forward Support Battalion
FSC	Forward Support Company
FSO	Fire Support Officer
FTF	Focused Targeting Force
HLZ	Helicopter Landing Zone
HVTs	High Value Targets
IED	Improvised Explosive Device
ITAS	Improved Target Acquisition Systems
JFO	Joint Fires Observer
JTAC	Joint Tactical Air Controller
LeT	Lashkar-e-Taiba
LAW	Light Anti-tank Weapon
LLVI	Low Level Voice Intercept
MEDCAP	Medical Civic Action Program
MEDEVAC	Medical Evacuation
MREs	Meals ready to eat
NDS	[Afghan] National Directorate of Security
NTC	National Training Center

ODA	Operation Detachment Alpha
PRT	Provincial Reconstruction Team
<i>Qalat</i>	a fortified place or fortified village
QRF	Quick Reaction Force
RCP	Route Clearance Package
ROE	Rules Of Engagement
RPGs	Rocket Propelled Grenades
RTE	ROUTE
RTO	Radio Telephone Operator
SAW	Squad Automatic Weapon
SF	Special Forces
SIGINT	Signals Intelligence
SOF	Special Operations Forces
TAC	Tactical Command Post
TF	Task Force
TOW	Tube-Launched, Optically-Tracked, Wire-Guided (missile)
UAV	Unmanned Aerial Vehicle
USAID	US Agency for International Development
VETCAP	Veterinary Civil Action Program
VPB	Vehicle Patrol Base

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