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Adapting to improve: the Odyssey of the operational mentoring and liaison teams of the United Kingdom, the Netherlands and Belgium

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Part 2

The Operational Mentoring and Liaison Teams
in Helmand, Uruzgan and Kunduz

Chapter 3

Chapter 3

Chapter 3: The OMLTs of Task Force Helmand 2006–2010

3.1 Introduction

The British Operational Mentoring and Liaison Team deployment started during Operation HERRICK 4, between March and October 2006. Operation HERRICK was the code name of the British campaign in Afghanistan, and HERRICK 4 constituted the first deployment of substantial British regular forces into the south of Afghanistan, a result of the expansion of the ISAF mission throughout Afghanistan. Before HERRICK 4, the British effort was focused on the delivery of the Provincial Reconstruction Team based around Mazar-e-Sharif in the north of Afghanistan.¹ However, the early HERRICK Force Elements were dispersed over four different locations, lacking a clear mission statement.² With no unifying mission for these Afghanistan Roulement Infantry Battalions (ARIBs), the commanding officer of the second rotation, 2nd Battalion Royal Gurkhas, thus formulated his own mission statement: “The ARIB is to deter terrorism, reassure and support the people of Afghanistan to return to normality after years of war, support the creation of the Afghan National Army and to support the Government of Afghanistan to create a secure environment and reinstate the rule of law.” The end state was formulated as “to enable Afghanistan to be a prosperous, democratic and successful country, free from terrorism and conflict.”³ Although this broadly formulated mission statement is not typically within the scope of a single battalion, it indicates the early recognised importance of constructing the nascent Afghan National Army into a coherent force.

The decision to switch to Helmand in 2006 “turned the UK’s commitment to Afghanistan from a military operation into a war.”⁴ Concurrently, when Operation HERRICK was taken to the south of Afghanistan, the necessity of standing up the Afghan Security Forces was also recognised by the ranking British officer of that rotation, the Commanding Officer (CO) of 16 Air Assault Brigade, brigadier Ed Butler. In his mission statement, he assessed that the Brigade’s force elements would “[c]onduct security and stabilisation operations within Helmand and the wider RC(SW), jointly with Afghan institutions, other government departments and multi-national partners in order to support Government of Afghanistan and development objectives.”⁵ As the British forces entered Helmand province, the present

1 Directorate Land Warfare, Operation HERRICK Campaign Study, Warminster 2015. https://books.google.nl/books?id=L_uojwEACAAJ, 1-1.

2 Ibid., 2.

3 2 RGR G3755, 18/03/2005, and 2RGR POR59-3G2 25/10/2005, retrieved from Directorate Land Warfare, Operation HERRICK Campaign Study, Warminster 2015.

4 Ibid., xxxv.

5 16 Air Assault Bde POR, retrieved from Directorate Land Warfare, Operation HERRICK Campaign Study, Warminster 2015.

ANA forces were included in the mission design, commanding an extra effort in the same spirit as the ARIB units, as the Afghan soldiers were judged to need guidance on their path to becoming an independent and professional army. The counterinsurgency campaign in Helmand can therefore not be comprehensively described without expressing the efforts of both the OMLTs and the ANA. Partially filling this hiatus, this chapter aims to propagate the OMLT's preparation and execution from its first inception in 2006 towards the semantic renaming of the OMLT to Brigade Advisory Groups in 2010.

In the 2006–2010 time frame, the OMLTs were mostly formed around a regular British army unit, starting with 7 Royal Horse Artillery (7 RHA). 7 RHA was subsequently succeeded by 45 Commando Royal Marines (45 CDO), the Grenadier Guards (GREN GDS), 2 Yorkshire Regiment (2 YORKS), 1 Regiment Royal Irish (1 R IRISH), 1st Battalion The Rifles (1 RIFLES), and the 2nd Battalion The Mercian Regiment (2 MERCIAN), ending with a second OMLT deployment by 2 YORKS in 2009/2010. After this, the OMLTs were changed to Brigade Advisory Groups (BAG), 2 YORKS were succeeded by the 1st Battalion of the Royal Regiment of Scotland, 1st Battalion Irish Guards, 3 MERCS, 2 and 3 RIFLES, a second iteration of 1 SCOTS, with 4 RIFLES deployed as the last BAG during HERRICK 18 in 2013.⁶

The British involvement in training up the Afghan National Army has been described as a “continually evolving process,” gradually expanding in size and professionalism as operation HERRICK progressed.⁷ In line with the recommendations of General McChrystal's Initial Commanders' Assessment in 2009, UK forces in Helmand moved from the OMLT concept to the ‘Embedded Partnering’ of UK units with Afghan counterparts, usually using the UK ‘company’ and Afghan ‘toli,’ each of around 120 men, as the basic building blocks.⁸ While the UK retained liaison teams attached to ANA units in Helmand, partnered UK-Afghan ‘Combined Forces’ have been the UK's principal means of training and mentoring newly raised ANA forces from 2010 onwards.

The way in which a state forms up and deploys its armed forces depends, amongst other variables, on its strategic culture. This chapter will therefore start with a description of British strategic culture, followed by a disquisition on the British political decision-making process and the design of the British armed forces. These sections will elucidate the British road to Helmand, as well as give some insights into the force structure of the Task Force Helmand. Subsequently, the Operational Mentoring and Liaison Teams of the British during Operation HERRICK will be described in detail and placed into the context, where necessary, of the

6 British Army, *Operation Herrick Campaign Study*, Warminster: Directorate Land Warfare (2015), 18–20.

7 British Ministry of Defence, *Army Field Manual Tactics for Stability Operations Part 5: Military Support to Capacity Building*.

8 Operations in Afghanistan, Memorandum of the Ministry of Defence, session 2010–2011 see: <https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201011/cmselect/cmdfence/writev/afghanistan/opa7.htm>, accessed 26/08/2020.

progress of the Helmand Campaign. This will commence with the reconstruction of the first British rotation in Helmand province, HERRICK 4, and will end with the British transition to Brigade Advisory Groups after HERRICK 11, ending the British OMLT efforts.

3.1.1 British Strategic Culture

The United Kingdom is a state with global aspirations, although the UK could best be described as possessing only medium economic and military capacity. In the earlier parts of the twentieth century, the UK still represented a global colonial sovereignty; however, after fighting two world wars, followed by the “constraints and threats” during the post-WW2 Cold War, the British consented to their new role in the global periphery.⁹ Still, after being usurped by the US as the world’s leading global power, the UK reverted to a policy of “punching above its weight” in order to remain relevant and influential on the global stage.¹⁰ To the British, the ability to exert global influence is directly linked to its national interest, with the British National Security Strategy stating that “Britain’s national interest requires us to reject any notion of the shrinkage of our influence.”¹¹ As such, the British have a long history of using the armed forces as a means to attain its foreign policy goals.

According to Paul Williams, the foundations of British foreign policy can be historically and traditionally traces to multilateralism, neo-liberalism and Atlanticism.¹² This is corroborated by the UK government’s strategic documents in force. It is in this strategic context that the utility of the UK armed forces is mostly observed.

Although the UK has been involved in singular campaigns, including large-scale international campaigns in the Falkland Islands (1982) as well as extended domestic operations such as during ‘the Troubles’ in Northern Ireland (1960s–1998), it does not aspire to tackle future conflicts singlehandedly. Rather, the UK formally expects future conflicts to be fought in a coalition effort, with the US and France named as preferred partners.¹³ Notwithstanding the expectation of coalition warfare, the possibility to engage in military

9 Alister Miskimmon, “Continuity in the Face of Upheaval—British Strategic Culture and the Impact of the Blair Government,” *European Security* 13, no. 3 (2004): 276, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09662830490499975>, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09662830490499975>.

10 Ritchie Ovendale, review of *Success and Failure in British Foreign Policy: Evaluating the Record, 1900–2000*, by Peter Mangold, *Albion* 35, no. 2 (2003): 350, <https://doi.org/10.2307/4054200>.

11 British National Security Strategy 2010, <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/the-national-security-strategy-a-strong-britain-in-an-age-of-uncertainty> accessed 05/02/2021.

12 Paul Williams, “Who’s Making UK Foreign Policy?,” *International Affairs* 80, no. 5 (2004): 912.

13 Government, Short National Security Strategy and Strategic Defence and Security Review 2015: A Secure and Prosperous United Kingdom, (November, 2015), https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/478933/52309_Cm_9161_NSS_SD_Review_web_only.pdf. Accessed 14/09/2021.

action without allied support is still considered a valid option to the British government. The multilateral foundation of British strategy might be found in the premium its government puts on cooperation with multilateral institutions such as NATO and the UN. Besides this multilateralism through institutions, the UK practises multilateralism through a more informal way by engaging in ‘coalitions of the willing,’ such as in the Afghanistan War.¹⁴

The second foundation of British foreign policy is the relation with the US, often referred to as the ‘special relationship’ between the two states.¹⁵ The UK considers the US as vital to its national interest. Not only is the US the world leading economic power as well as the UK’s key economic partner, the UK considers the US as the actor that shapes global stability and leads international responses to crises.¹⁶ The US is therefore considered the UK’s pre-eminent partner for security, defence, foreign policy and prosperity.¹⁷ The UK-US relationship has become strained in recent years though, with several high profile diplomatic spats.¹⁸

Although UK-US relations post WW2 have historical precedents in souring, including periods such as the 1956 Suez Crisis and the Vietnam War (1955–1975), the current relationship has been described by Thomas Wright as a “post-war low.”¹⁹ The statement by UK defence secretary that “the assumptions of 2010 that we were always going to be part of a US coalition is really just not where we are going to be”²⁰ is a case in point that the UK is considering the possibility that it has to fight a war without US support. Notwithstanding, the bilateral

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14 Williams, “Who’s Making UK Foreign Policy?”

15 See: Mirjam Grandia, *Deadly Embrace: The Decision Paths to Uruzgan and Helmand* (Faculty of Social and Behavioural Sciences, Leiden University, 2015); John Dumbrell, *A Special Relationship: Anglo-American Relations from the Cold War to Iraq* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), 101; Kagan, *Of Paradise and Power*, 5.

16 Henrik B. L. Larsen, *NATO’s Democratic Retrenchment: Hegemony After the Return of History* (Routledge, 2019), 93.

17 Steve Marsh, “‘Global Security: US-UK Relations’: Lessons for the Special Relationship?,” *Journal of Transatlantic Studies* 10, no. 2 (2012): 185.

18 These diplomatic spats included leaked emails by the British diplomatic service describing the incumbent administration as “chaotic” and “inept,” which resulted in the US president unprecedentedly labelling the UK ambassador a “pompous fool” and “a very stupid guy,” effectively forcing Sir Kim Darroch, the UK ambassador to the US, to resign. This diplomatic row was compounded by incidents such as the American refusal to waive the diplomatic immunity of the wife of an American intelligence officer after a hit-and-run car accident, and extradite her to the UK, as well as disagreement over the Iran nuclear deal and the opposing stance on cooperation with Chinese company Huawei on the 5G network construction in the UK. See: James Landale, “US-UK Relations: Is London Toughening Its Stance with Washington?” BBC, 24 January 2020, <https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-51237317>. Accessed 21/12/2020.

19 Thomas Wright, “The U.K. Ambassador’s Crime Was Stating the Obvious,” *The Atlantic*, 10 July 2019, <https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2019/07/message-trump-sent-forcing-out-kim-darroch/593617/>.

20 “Ben Wallace: UK ‘Must Be Prepared to Fight Wars without US,’” BBC, 12 January 2020, <https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-51081861>. Accessed 21/12/2020.

relation between the UK and the US remains key to the UK, which not only shares key defence assets with the US—including the F35 jet fighters, its nuclear deterrent delivery system and a reliance on the US for sensitive intelligence through the ‘five eyes’ intelligence-sharing alliance—but also finds itself somewhat isolated in Europe, due to the UK decision to leave the European Union. The current British administration is therefore treading on eggshells in their communication with the previous administration, well aware of transactional preference towards international relations as well as their lack of consideration for tradition and history.²¹

The last pillar of the UK foreign policy triad, neo-liberalism is discernible in its positions in British foreign and security policy—especially its positions on trade, economic development, and international (development) aid by organisations such as the World Bank, which were notable in subsequent British governments since Thatcher.²² As Marjam Grandia explained in her dissertation, the Labour governments from 1997 onward were eager to include liberal views as values needed to uphold a stable international community.²³ The statements made by the Labour Party in their 1997 manifesto, on Labour’s ambition that Britain was to be “respected in the world for the integrity with which it conducts its foreign relations” and the desire to “restore Britain’s pride and influence as a leading force for good in the world” echo in the current strategic papers.²⁴ The 2015 National Security Review capitalised on this issue, mentioning that the UK will “use our formidable development budget and our soft power to promote British values and to tackle the causes of the security threats we face, not just their consequences. This includes refocusing our aid budget to support fragile and broken states and regions to prevent a conflict—and, crucially, to promote the golden thread of conditions that drive prosperity all across the world: the rule of law, good governance and the growth of democracy.”²⁵

The UK has used its armed forces extensively in counter-piracy operations, air exclusion, peacekeeping, COIN and other irregular operations and disaster relief. The British extensive use of the military is reflected in for instance its casualties: since the Second World War,

21 “US-UK relations: Strains in the ‘Greatest Alliance,’” *Financial Times*, 12 July, 2019, <https://www.ft.com/content/887e27f2-a486-11e9-974c-ad1c6ab5efd1>; John Haltiwanger, “Trump Is Entering Another NATO Summit All Alone, with Even His Ally Boris Johnson Telling Him to Back Off and Keep Quiet,” *Business Insider*, 29 November 2019, <https://www.businessinsider.nl/trump-enters-nato-summit-friendless-abandoned-even-by-boris-johnson-2019-11?international=true&r=US>. Accessed 21/12/2021.

22 Grandia, *Deadly Embrace: The Decision Paths to Uruzgan and Helmand*, 102; Martin B. Carstensen and Matthias Matthijs, “Of Paradigms and Power: British Economic Policy Making Since Thatcher,” *Governance* 31, no. 3 (2018).

23 Grandia, *Deadly Embrace: The Decision Paths to Uruzgan and Helmand*, 102.

24 Labour Party Manifesto 1997, “New Labour: Because Britain Deserves Better,” Labour Party (1997 London).

25 Government, *Short National Security Strategy and Strategic Defence and Security Review 2015: A Secure and Prosperous United Kingdom*.

only two years have passed without British troops being killed on operations; 1968 and 2016. Undeniably, the UK has frequently demonstrated the alacrity to use diplomatic, economic, but also military means to pursue its ambitions and to show responsibility regarding international security policy. In recent years, however, the gap between the declared ambition and the political authority and material capacity to influence international security appears to be widening.²⁶ Still, the UK continues to exert influence abroad, with its permanent seat in the UN's Security Council and its nuclear deterrent instruments of power that reflect its global influence.

3.1.2 The British Political Decision-making Process Regarding the Use of the Armed Forces

The United Kingdom uses the Westminster model as its parliamentary system, which includes features such as the majority rule, the absence of a constitution and the prerogative powers of the executive power.²⁷ Therefore, in the British case, the decision to deploy the Armed Forces in situations of armed conflict is considered a prerogative power.²⁸ In the event of a declaration of war or the commitment of British forces to military action, constitutional convention requires that authorisation is given by the Prime Minister, on behalf of the Crown.²⁹ Decisions on military action are taken within the cabinet with advice from, among others, the National Security Council (NSC) and the Chief of the Defence Staff which is subsequently delegated to the British Prime Minister. Accordingly, the Prime Minister thus has the formal authority to deploy British forces to war, without the necessity to either inform the British parliament or seek the approval of the House of Commons. Decisions on military action are taken within the cabinet with advice from, amongst others, the NSC and the Chief of the Defence Staff.³⁰

The royal prerogative and lack of involvement by the British parliament has long been criticised for what is considered to be an “absence of democratic accountability of the use of force, in other words, a democratic deficit.”³¹ Since 2003, a number of governmental referrals to the House of Commons has led to a convention regarding the use of the armed forces in relation to combat operations abroad.³² As James Strong explains:

26 Paul Cornish, “Strategic Culture in the United Kingdom,” In *Strategic Cultures in Europe, Security and Defence Policies Across the Continent*, eds. Heiko Biehl, Bastian Giegerich & Alexandra Jones (Springer VS Wiesbaden; 2013), 362.

27 Arend Lijphart, *Patterns of Democracy: Government Forms and Performance in Thirty-six Countries* (Yale University Press, 2012), 33; Robert A Rhodes, *Beyond Westminster and Whitehall: The Sub-central Governments of Britain* (Taylor & Francis, 1988).

28 C. Mills, *Parliamentary Approval for Military Action*, House of Commons Library (London, 2018).

29 Ibid.

30 Ibid.

31 Grandia, *Deadly Embrace: The Decision Paths to Uruzgan and Helmand*, 106.

32 Strong, “The War Powers of the British Parliament.”

the War Powers Convention is a tentative constitutional convention that the government will seek the prior approval of the House of Commons before launching military combat operations abroad. It grew out of precedents set in substantive votes approving the invasion of Iraq in 2003, intervention in Libya in 2011 and two rounds of action against Da'esh, in Iraq in 2014 and Syria in 2015, as well as one vote opposing intervention in Syria in 2013.³³

Importantly, the deployment of Special Forces (SF/SOF), intelligence activities and all military deployment that might be considered under the 'combat operations' threshold are exempt from parliamentary oversight. These would include most SFA-type operations, as training and assistance missions and capacity-building operations are easily narrated as non-combat operations, avoiding scrutiny by the House of Commons. Also, in the case of emergencies, the British governments reserve the right to act first and seek retrospective approval in situations involving imminent threats to national security or humanitarian disaster.³⁴

As the United Kingdom does not have a codified constitution, it draws from statute law, common law, works of authority and conventions to act as an uncoded constitution. Conventions are considered to be rules of constitutional practice that are regarded as binding in operation, but not in law.³⁵ This definition is drawn from the Cabinet Manual, itself a 'work of authority.' Despite the non-legal status of conventions, they are always almost adhered to by politicians. The War Powers convention does allow the British cabinet to bypass parliament on the aforementioned use of SOF, intelligence assets and other deployments short of warfare. As a result, the lack of parliamentary oversight on the use of SOF especially has led to renewed criticism of this 'democratic deficit,' with the British SAS especially considered to have a *carte blanche* on operations.³⁶ This indicates that the strategic value placed on partnered operations by the British armed forces, by both SOF as well as regular forces, is not open for parliamentary evaluation and reappraisal. This assessment is compounded by the findings by Grandia concerning other operations, as she stated that "some respondents argued that there seems to be an institutional overreliance on the [British] military [...] the [British] army have been calling the shots when it came to the

33 Ibid.

34 Oxford Research Group, "The War Powers Convention: An Interview with James Strong," 29 May 2018 <https://www.oxfordresearchgroup.org.uk/blog/the-war-powers-convention-an-interview-with-james-strong>.

35 Andrew Blick, "The Cabinet Manual and the Codification of Conventions," *Parliamentary Affairs* 67, no. 1 (2014), 192.

36 M. Karlshoej-Pedersen and L. Walpole, *Time for External Oversight of Britain's Special Forces*, Oxford Research Group (London, 2019); Rory Cormac, "Disruption and Deniable Interventionism: Explaining the Appeal of Covert Action and Special Forces in Contemporary British Policy," *International Relations* 31, no. 2 (2017), 182. George Arbuthnott, Jonathan Calvert and David Collins, "Rogue SAS Squad Exposed by Email Trail," *The Times*, 1 August 2020, <https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/rogue-sas-afghanistan-execution-squad-exposed-by-email-trail-7pg3dkdww>. Accessed 28/05/2021.

deployment to Helmand. The politicians were standing behind. The tactical structure was dictating the planning process instead of the other way around.”³⁷ Still, lack of knowledge on military operations and processes still allows for senior military personnel to operate rather autonomously, as politicians and senior policymakers are not au fait on military issues.³⁸

3.1.3 The British Armed Forces

This section will give a succinct description of the British armed forces. Most importantly, it will give a more elaborate explanation of the branch that provides the vast bulk of SFA, which is the British Army. This has a historical precedent, as tracing back to its colonial days, the British empire has relied on a system of co-optation with local chieftains and other tribal leaders. Moreover, the colonies provided the British Army with a steady flow of indigenous soldiers, used to compensate for the lack of manpower of the British Army and to create ‘mass’ to conduct the land operations.³⁹ The current British Army has generally reverted to the use of its citizens for staffing purposes, with notable exceptions being the inclusion of the Nepalese Gurkha regiment in the British forces since the early nineteenth century and the ability for commonwealth nations’ citizens to apply for the British forces. Although the British no longer train and equip local forces for service within the British Empire, Britain is still vigorous in Commonwealth states regarding SFA-type operations, as shown by its deployments in Nigeria, Sierra Leone and Kenya.⁴⁰ Other contemporary SFA-type deployments by the British can be found in South Sudan, as well as Iraq, Afghanistan and Syria. The “enabling of indigenous security forces”⁴¹ is considered by the British Army as “second nature, as this capability has been seen in some form in almost all of our campaigns throughout history.”⁴²

The current British armed forces further consist of the Royal Navy and the Royal Air Force. Reminiscent of the former British Empire’s colonial heyday, the British have always put a premium on its navy, which includes the British Royal Marines. The value the British put on the Royal Navy is epitomised by its assets. For example, the UK is the only European power with two aircraft carriers. The British global reach is supplemented by modern destroyers and frigates. Furthermore, the British possess a nuclear-powered fleet of hunter-killer submarines, as well as a submarine-based nuclear deterrent in the four ships of the Vanguard Class. The British Royal Air Force is the youngest service in the British armed forces, with the RAF founded in 1919, and is the main provider of air power for the British armed forces.

37 Grandia, *Deadly Embrace: The Decision Paths to Uruzgan and Helmand*, 105.

38 Interview Emily Knowles, senior analyst, Special Risks at Control Risks, 14/08/2020.

39 Johnson, *True to Their Salt*, 15.

40 See: Current British deployments, <https://www.army.mod.uk/deployments/>, accessed 16/07/2020.

41 British Ministry of Defence, *Army Field Manual Tactics for Stability Operations Part 5: Military Support to Capacity Building*, 8–6.

42 Ibid, 8–6.

To that end, the backbone of the RAF will be its 157 Eurofighter jets and 138 F35b fighters, with the latter being operated in conjunction with the fleet air arm.⁴³ Apart from its fighter aircraft, the RAF operated several types of helicopter and cargo aircraft, as well as ten MQ-9 Reaper UAVs.

With the emphasis on sea power, the British army has traditionally been a rather small force, albeit highly trained and professional. Tracing back to 1707, the British army has been involved in all major conflicts of the British Empire since its inception, and after the end of the British Empire in 1997,⁴⁴ the conflicts in which the United Kingdom was involved, including the 2001 invasion of Iraq and the Afghanistan conflict from 2003 to this day.

3.2 The Decision Path to Helmand

Over the last couple centuries, the United Kingdom has been no stranger to Afghanistan. Already in the nineteenth century, as part of their efforts to establish control over the region and counteract Russian influence, it had a significant military presence in the country. Indeed, the First Anglo-Afghan War took place in 1839–1842, leading to a British defeat and withdrawal. The Second Anglo-Afghan War took place in 1878–1880 and resulted in the establishment of a British protectorate over Afghanistan.⁴⁵ The British involvement in Afghanistan continued until the country's independence in 1919. Although the UK was to some extent involved in supporting the Muhajideen during the 1979–1989 Soviet-Afghan War,⁴⁶ its next involvement pertained to supporting the United States following the attacks of 9/11. As the 2001 OEF campaign in Afghanistan led to the quick downfall of the Taliban government, the subsequent (non-envisioned) transition from a counterterrorism effort to a counterinsurgency led to a greater requisite for international troop contributions.⁴⁷ Fighting a counterinsurgency necessitates control over the population, and thus controlling the countryside. To this end, ISAF's span of control expanded from the capital city and its immediate surroundings to the entire state.

43 RAF receives Final Eurofighter Typhoon, Janes Defence, see <https://www.janes.com/article/91594/raf-receives-final-eurofighter-typhoon>, accessed 06/03/2020; Ministry of Defence "UK to Double F-35 Fleet with 17-jet Order," 15 November 2018, <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/uk-to-double-f-35-fleet-with-17-jet-order-defence-secretary-announces>.

44 Piers Brendon, *The Decline and Fall of the British Empire, 1781–1997* (Vintage, 2008), 660.

45 For more information on the Anglo-Afghan wars see: Gregory Fremont-Barnes, *The Anglo-Afghan Wars 1839–1919* (Bloomsbury Publishing, 2014).

46 See: L. W. Grau, "The Soviet-Afghan War: A Superpower Mired in the Mountains," *Journal of Slavic Military Studies* 17, no. 1 (2004): 129–51.

47 Martijn Kitzén, *The Course of Co-option: Co-option of Local Power-holders as a Tool for Obtaining Control Over the Population in Counterinsurgency Campaigns in Weblike Societies: With Case Studies on Dutch Experiences During the Aceh War (1873–c. 1912) and the Urzgan Campaign (2006–2010)*, (Nederlandse Defensie Academie, 2016), 358.

In 2004, however, the British were involved in two wars. Besides the war in Afghanistan, the UK was also heavily committed to the war in Iraq. British policymakers aimed to withdraw from the highly unpopular war in Iraq, known as OPERATION TELIC, and replace this operation with a larger military contingent in Afghanistan.⁴⁸ In doing so, the unpopular Iraq war could be interchanged with the widely supported Afghanistan operation, whilst simultaneously avoiding any accusations of ally defection from the United States. Initially, the British government had only deployed a relatively small number of troops to Afghanistan's north, in the town of Mazar-e-Sharif.⁴⁹ As ISAF aimed to support the Afghan government to expand its influence over the entirety of Afghanistan, ISAF forces gradually took responsibility for the southern provinces of Afghanistan. In 2006, Canadian General David Fraser took command of Regional Command South, the higher ISAF echelon based in Kandahar City.⁵⁰ As it were, Canada would become the lead ISAF nation in charge of Kandahar province, the Dutch in Uruzgan province, while the British took charge of Helmand.⁵¹

As for Helmand, at the start of 2005, 16 Air Assault Brigade (16 AAB) was given the warning order to deploy to the province. The 3rd Battalion, the Parachute Regiment, would form the nucleus of the first rotation. This battalion was a subordinate unit of the Brigade and one of its principal combat units. Other elements, such as the Provincial Reconstruction Team (PRT), engineers and fire support elements were also drawn from subsidiaries of the Brigade. The OMLT for this first rotation in Helmand was formed around the command structure of the 7th Parachute Regiment, Royal Horse Artillery (RHA),⁵² also a subsidiary of 16 AAB.

The British operational planning was dubbed the 'Helmand Plan,' drawn up on the basis of civilian and military experts, which aimed to build an Afghan Development Zone in the lozenge of Lashkar Gah, Gereshk, and Camp Bastion.⁵³ Although this limited and modest goal seemed reasonable and achievable considering the limited manpower available, the

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48 For a detailed description of how Great Britain got involved in the ISAF mission, see: Matt Cavanagh, "Ministerial Decision-making in the Run-up to the Helmand Deployment," *The RUSI Journal* 157, no. 2 (2012): 48–54; Grandia, *Deadly Embrace: The Decision Paths to Uruzgan and Helmand*; Anthony King "Understanding the Helmand Campaign: British Military Operations in Afghanistan," *International Affairs* (Royal Institute of International Affairs 1944–) 86, no. 2 (2010): 311–32; Theo Farrell, *Unwinnable: Britain's War in Afghanistan, 2001–2014*, (Random House, 2017).

49 British Army, Operation Herrick Campaign Study, Warminster: Directorate Land Warfare (2015).

50 Farrell, *Unwinnable: Britain's war in Afghanistan*, 169.

51 Robert Egnell "Lessons from Helmand, Afghanistan: What Now for British Counterinsurgency?" *International Affairs* 87, no. 2 (2011): 301.

52 The official abbreviation is 7 (Para) RHA; however, for reasons of readability, 7 RHA is used, as is also common within the British army.

53 Frank Ledwidge, *Losing Small Wars: British Military Failure in the 9/11 Wars*, (Yale University Press, 2017), 78; Interview UK CO HTF 4, 17/09/2020.

main concern of the Afghan government was that “the Taliban could not be seen to have control of any part of the province.”⁵⁴

In the preparatory phase of the HERRICK campaign, the exact role of the OMLT had been unclear. This was not solely an OMLT issue, as all subsequent HERRICK rotations, including the ground-holding battalions, had to adapt to the intensity of the conflict that 16 AAB experienced.⁵⁵ However, despite the fact that the British government did not have a comprehensive understanding of the type of conflict Helmand would present, working alongside indigenous forces would have been a significant part of the campaign either way. After all, training, advising, mentoring local forces are a significant part of all operationalisations of irregular warfare. These operationalisations include stability operations, counterterrorism, unconventional warfare and counterinsurgency operations.⁵⁶

As such, the British HERRICK 4 OMLT is the starting point of an adaptation process of the British Army on combat mentoring. This professionalisation would pertain to doctrine, pre-deployment training as well as the army force structure. This chapter provides the reconstruction of the HERRICK 4 OMLT endeavours to mentor an indigenous force in Afghanistan. The experiences during this rotation have provided the impetus to adapt the OMLT concept in later rotations, thus providing the foundation of the informal and formal learning processes during the HERRICK campaign, as well as the institutionalisation of the lessons learned during later army reforms post-conflict.

3.2.1 OMLT HERRICK 4: 7th Parachute Regiments Royal Horse Artillery

In late 2005, the assignment to deploy to Helmand was given to 16 Air Assault Brigade, the British high-readiness formation and considered to be a brigade of elite status. It was decided by its commanding officer (CO), Brigadier Butler, that the 3rd Battalion, the Parachute Regiment, would form the nucleus of the combat power for HERRICK 4. Other elements in the Helmand Task Force, such as the Provincial Reconstruction Team, engineers and fire support elements were also drawn from subsidiaries of the brigade. The mentoring role during HERRICK 4 OMLT was based around the command structure of 7th Parachute Regiment Royal Horse Artillery (7 RHA), also a subsidiary of 16 AAB and under normal circumstances a combat support unit, providing the brigade with indirect fire support. However, the CO of 7 RHA, Lt. Col. David Hammond, was facing a three-pronged mission statement. First, 7 RHA was tasked to provide a ground-based fire support battery to 3 PARA, which was an organic assignment, as the battalion-sized artillery unit was responsible for providing fire support to the brigade. Second, 7 RHA was tasked to provide leadership and personnel to

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54 Ibid., 79.

55 Interview GBR 04, 19/09/2020

56 Kitzen, *Operations in Irregular Warfare*. 2

the ‘Bastion Battlegroup,’ an ad-hoc unit led by 7 RHA but augmented with other subunits, including a company of the Royal Gurkha Rifles (RGR) Regiment. The Bastion Battlegroup was tasked with the security of Camp Bastion, the large UK base located in the desert of Helmand province, and still under construction in 2006. Third, 7 RHA would provide the command structure for the first UK OMLT, and would as such be responsible for the staffing, training and execution of the OMLT deployment of the first rotation.

Part of an elite light infantry brigade, specialists such as artillerymen within 16 Brigade were considered to be ‘paratroopers first, specialists second.’ Still, 7 RHA was short on personnel and lacked combat, combat support and combat service support specialists to augment the already understaffed unit, tasked with three disparate assignments. Additional service members were subsequently “collated from different units and regiments via a trawl at the Land Level,”⁵⁷ meaning that Army service members could respond to the staffing request if their current occupations and their commanding officers so allowed. Eventually, the 7RHA OMLT consisted of a very disparate group of around eighty-five officers, NCOs and some private soldiers.⁵⁸ This included service members from the Territorial Army,⁵⁹ Royal Logistic Corps, Royal Signals, Army Air Corps and a variety of other services, including 7 RHA.

Lt. Col. Hammond had to divide his attention over the triptych of tasks, hence the decision was made that the second in command of 7 RHA, Major MacKay, was to be mostly involved in the execution of the pre-deployment training of the OMLT. This would later extend to leading the OMLT operations as well.⁶⁰ It proved to be a daunting task, as there was not a comprehensive understanding of the objectives of the OMLT, and many individual augmentees had not reported to the unit yet. A late 2005 reconnaissance by Hammond and Mackay led to some clarification as to the OMLT tasks, and specialists were recruited in order to augment the OMLT with mentoring capability on logistics and combat support. The pre-deployment training was minimal, however, as only a couple of weeks’ worth of training was executed with part of the OMLT. This included shooting and some platoon-level training, but also some briefings on Afghanistan and what was known on the Afghan Army. Hammond, a T.E. Lawrence enthusiast, drew from the writings of the famous British officer-author for the OMLTs’ conceptual guidance on working with indigenous forces. Still, despite all efforts, a fortnight of training was inadequate to establish standard operation procedures or team

57 Email correspondence UK OMLT mentor 33, 17/07/2020.

58 Ibid.

59 The Territorial Army was until 2014 the designation for the British Army reservist force. Since 2014 it is known as the Army Reserve. The Army Reserve is a part of the military forces of Britain that is made up of people who are not professional soldiers but are given military training for a period of time each year.

60 Interview UK OMLT mentor 35, 29/10/2020.

building, further complicating the mentoring task ahead.⁶¹ The ad-hoc composition of the OMLT is reflected by one of its members, who stated,

I received no pre-deployment training for this job. I had just returned from a three-month deployment in Norway with 3 Commando Brigade. [...] I returned to the UK to immediately embark on my Map Reading Instructors Course. Whilst on course, I received immediate notice of movement. I returned to my unit and deployed to theatre within a week. On arrival to Camp Bastion it became apparent that I was not expected, I was not on their ORBAT.⁶²

Although Hammond regarded his soldiers' basic skills as "up for the task," he reflected that "it was a compromise from the off. We did not get the numbers of personnel to adequately staff the mentoring effort."⁶³

Importantly, the mentoring task Hammond referred to was not clear from the start. That specific part was added to their mission in Kandahar, where they were briefed by Colonel Knaggs, the commanding officer of the Helmand Task Force (HTF). Mackay recalls that they were met by Knaggs, who informed the OMLT on the importance of their mission, and that it was going to be the main effort of the operation.⁶⁴ Although most of the OMLT were pleased to hear that mentoring was considered a prominent task, some of the OMLT were becoming a bit uncomfortable due to the changing nature of their deployment.⁶⁵ Before Knaggs' speech, it was understood that the OMLT would perform training duties in an Afghan Army barracks, a long stretch from joining the ANA on combat operations. Doctrinally, combat mentoring, under the 'Military Assistance' moniker, is a special forces prerogative, and special forces receive special training and equipment to mitigate the risk that ensues embedding with indigenous forces.⁶⁶ Lacking vehicles, heavy weapons, radios and night vision equipment, the OMLT felt understaffed, undertrained and underequipped for their combat mentoring role. Knaggs' subsequent promise to see to their shortages before fielding the OMLT did not materialise in theatre, angering the OMLT:

61 British Ministry of Defence, Convening Order for Board of Inquiry: Death of Cap JA Phillipson RA 555260 on 11 Jun 06, (2007), 7–9.

62 Email correspondence GBR 33, 17/07/2020.

63 Interview UK OMLT mentor 35, 29/10/2020.

64 Interview UK CO HTF 2, 28/10/2020.

65 Ibid.

66 Wiltenburg and Kitzen, "What's in a Name."

Back at Kandahar, before we deployed to Tombstone,⁶⁷ I got given the big war pride speech of Col. Knaggs and he said we'd be—you know, we would not deploy on the ground unless we were fully ready to go with the equipment we require, we were going to be the main effort, his main effort. Well, that was a lie. [...] the whole time we were there we didn't get the equipment that we asked for, there wasn't enough of it and so it never arrived.⁶⁸

Presented with this new reality, the OMLT set to train both the Afghans and themselves in theatre. Setting up in Camp Shorabak, the ANA barracks adjacent to Camp Bastion, the OMLT managed to borrow some armoured American HMMWV 4x4 vehicles to supplement their ageing 'Snatch' Land Rovers, designed for urban operations in Northern Ireland. Also, the OMLT was donated a few broken down 'WMIKs,' Land Rovers equipped with a Weapon Mount Installation Kit (WMIK), and a heavy machine gun mount. After repairs, it allowed the OMLT to operate with a greatly improved direct fire support capability by the 4x4s.

Within weeks of deploying, the OMLT were tasked to accompany the ANA on patrols, as there was political pressure from the Afghan Government to get the ANA into the field, on operations, as soon as possible. The 3 PARA Battlegroup was thus augmented with the ANA, who in turn would be mentored by small bands of the OMLT, usually in groups of three or four.⁶⁹ Many 3 PARA officers were initially not keen to have ANA soldiers join their ranks. Mackay stated that

most [3 PARA] people thought that the ANA were unreliable, potentially dangerous and a liability (subsequent events would prove this to be reasonable concerns), and it took a little bit of persuading for 3 PARA officers to accept that they were to have ANA with them on the patrols. Small groups would go out, with a few mentors. The first few times it went fine, it was good publicity, it pleased the governor and the Afghan government in Kabul, and people started to latch on that it was capacity building, part of the strategy, and an important part of the mission in Afghanistan.⁷⁰

The focus, however, quickly shifted from limited patrolling to participating in the escalating insurgency. The initial 'Helmand Plan,' drawn up on the basis of experienced civilian and military experts, aimed to build an Afghan Development Zone in the 'lozenge' of the towns of Lashkar Gah, Gereshk and Camp Bastion.⁷¹ Although this limited and modest goal seems reasonable and achievable considering the limited manpower available, the main concern of

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67 FOB Tombstone was the American FOB next to Camp Bastion.

68 Transcription Sgt. Castle, Bol regarding the Death of Capt. J. Phillippson.

69 Dan Collins, *In Foreign Fields: Heroes of Iraq and Afghanistan in Their Own Words* (Monday Books, 2008).

70 Interview UK OMLT mentor 40, 20/01/2021.

71 Ledwidge, *Losing Small Wars: British Military Failure in the 9/11 Wars*, 78.

the Afghan government was that “the Taliban could not be seen to have control of any part of the province.”⁷² As pressure increased on the Helmand governor to support the Afghan National Police in towns suffering from an increasing Taliban influence, the decision was made to reinforce those locations with British troops. The district centres of Now Zad, Sangin, Kajaki and Musa Qala in the north of Helmand were subsequently reinforced with British forces. This stretched the 650-man strong combat force, as the CO of 3 PARA had to commit almost all of his forces to static locations, forfeiting his ability to manoeuvre. Fixed, the Taliban attempted to overrun the British positions in a series of pitched battles over the 2006 summer that have subsequently been described in detail in a number of publications.⁷³

The ANA and the OMLT were heavily involved in the fighting, including in the defence of the forward operating base (FOB) in Sangin, FOB Robinson. Known as ‘FOB Rob,’ the base was large and difficult to defend, and therefore would consume too much British manpower. This led to an ANA stationing at the FOB from May 2006 onwards, supplementing the defensive effort.

It was in Sangin that the British suffered their first fatality of the campaign with the death of OMLT Captain Jim Phillippson.⁷⁴ The subsequent investigation into the death of Phillippson provided a scathing assessment of the OMLT commander leading the QRF, stating that “Phillippson was killed as a result of poor tactical decision making, a lack of SOPs⁷⁵ and a lack of equipment.”⁷⁶ A subsequent investigation absolved the involved Bristow however, reversing the critical assessment of his performance, stating “the events of the night of 11 Jun 06 reflect considerable credit on those involved, especially [censored]⁷⁷ who showed both tenacity and courage in persisting with his intent.”⁷⁸ It was established that the OMLT lacked resources and were understaffed. The investigations also indicated the low priority given to the OMLT regarding the distribution of mission-essential equipment such as heavy weapons,

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72 Ibid., 79.

73 Ledwidge, *Losing Small Wars: British Military Failure in the 9/11 Wars*; Stuart Tootal, *Danger Close: The True Story of Helmand from the Leader of 3 Para* (Hachette UK, 2009); Farrell, *Unwinnable: Britain's War in Afghanistan, 2001–2014*; Farrell, Osinga, and Russell, *Military Adaptation in Afghanistan*; British Army, *Operation Herrick Campaign Study*, Warminster: Directorate Land Warfare (2015).

74 Brigadier J. J. S. Bourne-May, *Service Inquiry Into the Death of 555260 Captain JA Phillippson, 7th Parachute Regiment, Royal Horse Artillery (7 Para RHA)*, British Army (Shrewsbury, UK, 2009).

75 Standard Operating Procedures, a form of military standardisation of actions in combat.

76 Defence, *Short Convening Order for Board of Inquiry: Death of Cap JA Phillippson RA 555260 on 11 Jun 06*.

77 The censored name is that of Major (ret.) Jonny Bristow, Royal Regiment of Scotland, part of the HERRICK 4 OMLT as the mentor to the kandak commander.

78 Bourne-May, *Service Inquiry Into the Death of 555260 Captain JA Phillippson, 7th Parachute Regiment, Royal Horse Artillery (7 Para RHA)*.

vehicles and night vision goggles.⁷⁹ Although no action was taken after initial reporting that the OMLT were operating under-resourced before any casualties had yet been taken, the death of Philippson catalysed some of the redistribution of assets, including heavy weapons and WMIK Land Rovers, increasing the OMLT's force protection ability during subsequent operations. This elaborates on the events and contexts leading up to the death of Philippson, whose demise led to a flurry of adaptations during later rotations.

Sangin is a rather small town in Helmand Province, located on the Helmand River about 100 km north-east of Lashkar Gah. A centre for the drug trade, and a seat for Taliban resistance, the Afghan Government was distrusted in the Sangin Valley, and Coalition presence was rejected.⁸⁰ Indeed, prior to the deployment of the HTF, Sangin had already been recognised as a security threat.⁸¹ Outside of the envisioned lozenge, the town and the Sangin Valley would “likely become a major highway for the Taliban to launch attacks against the troops establishing themselves in the Afghan Development Zone (ADZ).”⁸²

Coalition presence was scarce, although a Forward Operating Base was set up by the US Army, called FOB Robinson, a few kilometres south of the town. Close to the Helmand River, FOB Robinson was named after a US Special Forces soldier who was killed near Sangin on 25 March 2006. It was the base from where a US detachment operated from until it was handed over to the British on the 2 June 2006. It had a bad reputation. FOB Robinson was described as “a bleak spot, an enclosed patch of featureless, gritty desert, filled with vehicles, tents and containers. The Americans who set it up called it the Poor Bastards’ Club.”⁸³

Few British troops were available to reinforce the Coalition presence in Sangin, although the necessity to counter the Taliban influence in Sangin was recognised. The CO of 3 PARA, Lt. Col. Stuart Tootal, and the commanding officer of 16 AAB, Brigadier Ed Butler, subsequently sought to establish the ‘Sangin Effect’ in mid-May 2006. The Sangin Effect is a loosely defined term that implies increasing British influence in an area, although with a minimum of British troops committed. This would allow the British to wield an amount of influence in Sangin, however, without further stretching the limited resources available.⁸⁴ So instead

79 British Ministry of Defence, Convening Order for Board of Inquiry: Death of Cap JA Phillipson RA 555260 on 11 Jun 06.

80 Phil Weatherill, “NOTE FROM THE FIELD: Targeting the Centre of Gravity: Adapting Stabilisation in Sangin,” *The RUSI Journal* 156, no. 4 (2011): 2.

81 Ed Butler, “Setting Ourselves Up for a Fall in Afghanistan: Where Does Accountability Lie for Decision-Making in Helmand in 2005–06?,” *The RUSI Journal* 160, no. 1 (2015): 51–52.

82 Butler, “Setting Ourselves Up for a Fall in Afghanistan,” 52.

83 Patrick Bishop, *3 Para: Afghanistan, Summer 2006: This Is War* (HarperCollins, 2007), 86.

84 The Sangin Effect is ill-defined. For further reference to the Sangin Effect see: Butler, “Setting Ourselves Up for a Fall in Afghanistan,” 52; Bishop, *3 Para: Afghanistan, Summer 2006*, 49, 51; James Pritchard and MLR Smith, “Thompson in Helmand:

of committing a Para company to Sangin, it was decided that the ANA would reinforce FOB Robinson, leaving the British company free to “patrol the area, support the ANA and carry out their own operations.”⁸⁵

On 5 May 2006, 7 RHA was given a number of tasks by the CO of the HTF. First, it was ordered to provide one Afghan Army Company to FOB Robinson in support of 3 PARA Battlegroup by 15 May 2006, to enable 3 PARA Battlegroup delivery of the “Sangin Effect with an Afghan ‘lead.’”⁸⁶ Second, it was ordered to provide a second Afghan company in support of 3 PARA operations by 25 May. Also, 7 RHA was ordered to support HTF operations and to contribute to the intelligence collection plan.⁸⁷ The tasks given to 7 RHA concerned Mackay; he shared his concern on the amount of understanding the HTF had regarding ANA operations. He considered that the ANA would need HTF support to sustain the Afghan Army presence in FOB Robinson. Also, both the ANA as well as the OMLT lacked armoured vehicles and crew-served weapon systems to provide security during the road move from Camp Bastion to FOB Robinson. Lastly, although the ANA were battalion-sized on paper, desertion and understaffing meant that the ANA could field little more than a company-sized element to FOB Robinson, even though the ANA Brigade Commander ordered an entire kandak to Sangin.⁸⁸

Nonetheless, it was ordered that the OMLT and the ANA would insert into FOB Robinson, with the convoy under the command of Lt. Col. Hammond, on 21 May 2006. Upon arrival, the ANA would relieve the Afghan Army soldiers already present at FOB Robinson. This contingent originated from a different brigade, stationed in Herat, and was under the auspices of a US Special Forces Embedded Training Team (ETT). This ANA unit had already spent forty days in Sangin, and there was significant pressure from the Afghan chain of command to replace it. Apparently, this ANA detachment was also suffering from desertion, as well as extortion from the local population.⁸⁹ On the 23rd, two days later than planned, the convoy conducted its road move from Camp Bastion to Sangin. The road move proved to be “exhausting and incident-filled,” as the seventy-six-vehicle convoy was regularly halted by bogged-down vehicles as well as an IED-strike as it was about to enter Sangin. Hammond has few fond memories of the decision and subsequent deployment of the ANA kandak to FOB Robinson:

Comparing Theory to Practice in British Counter-insurgency Operations in Afghanistan,” *Civil Wars* 12, no. 1–2 (2010): 71; Farrell, *Unwinnable: Britain’s war in Afghanistan, 2001–2014*, 173.

85 Bishop, *3 Para: Afghanistan, Summer 2006*, 51.

86 British Ministry of Defence, Convening Order for Board of Inquiry: Death of Cap JA Phillipson RA 555260 on 11 Jun 06. 11.

87 *Ibid.*, 11.

88 *Ibid.*, 12.

89 *Ibid.*, 12.

We were ordered to deploy a kandak that was simply not ready in my view, who had just got out of training, forward to occupy Sangin, because the government was losing its traction. This place, FOB Robinson, was an enormous FOB, which was completely indefensible, and that's where we relieved a whole bunch of reservist US Special Forces. To get there, we conducted a convoy operation with elements drawn from across the force, American, British, and so on, just to put a kandak up the road for a RIP, with raw Afghan troops. It was a bloody long day. My vehicle drove through a gap, two behind mine a vehicle went up, a Ford Ranger full of Afghan soldiers. I can still recall, as a commanding officer, putting pressure on the wound of one of the Afghan wounded soldiers. Subsequently, the mine strike was misinterpreted as an attack from a local village by the ANA, and so we had to stop the ANA, who were high as a kite on hash, from razing the place.⁹⁰

The next morning, Hammond was contacted by Knaggs whilst in FOB Robinson, and in the subsequent conversation, Hammond was ordered to establish a military presence in Sangin immediately. Intelligence indicated that the anti-coalition militia was concentrating at three locations and that the town of Sangin might fall to the Taliban if no action was taken. Hammond decided to lead a reconnaissance in force to Sangin, which was supported by the Patrols Platoon of 16 AAB, also subordinated to Hammond during the convoy, and a number of US soldiers in HMMWVs. Fire support would be provided by three Light Guns of I battery, a subsidiary of 7 RHA and also stationed at FOB Robinson.⁹¹ Hammond decided to take the ANA company from the Heratian brigade, which was due to be relieved, as he considered his own ANA unit to be not ready for an aggressive reconnaissance. The ANA hiatus in training and equipment was well-known to the HTE, but still it was decided that “despite the shortfalls in equipment and training, the ANA would be sent to FOB Robinson.”⁹²

Although the operation did not find a significant build-up of Taliban forces, the patrol was engaged three times, which were considered rather minor engagements. However, in one of the exchanges, an ANA soldier accidentally shot a child, which did not improve the already dour relations between the government forces and the local populace.⁹³ The incidents during this patrol, in combination with the intelligence that was already received, further indicated the dangerous operational environment in the Sangin valley. In the week prior, a joint four-vehicle patrol consisting of ANA soldiers, their US ETT and a few French Special Forces were

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90 Interview UK OMLT mentor 35, 29/10/2020.

91 British Ministry of Defence, Convening Order for Board of Inquiry: Death of Cap JA Phillippon RA 555260 on 11 Jun 06, 12.

92 Tootal, *Danger Close: The True Story of Helmand from the Leader of 3 Para*.

93 Leo Docherty, *Desert of Death: A Soldier's Journey from Iraq to Afghanistan* (Faber & Faber, 2007); Bristow, JDM Witness Statement, 2008.

ambushed along a six km stretch of road connecting Kajaki with Sangin.⁹⁴ The mutilated bodies of the two Frenchmen and nine ANA soldiers were delivered by locals at FOB Robinson on 21 May, the day after the ambush.⁹⁵

In order to reinforce the British presence in Sangin, a platoon of the Royal Irish, and later the Royal Gurkha Regiment was detached from the Bastion Battlegroup and sent to Sangin to man a platoon house near the town itself.⁹⁶ Together with the OMLT and the ANA, the British would maintain a presence and influence “as required.”⁹⁷ The OMLT and the ANA would in the following period conduct regular patrols to the British-manned platoon house to resupply the little base with water, ammunition and rations. Also, these patrols would add to the Afghan Army’s military presence in Sangin. An Unmanned Aerial Vehicle (UAV) Troop for 18 UAV Battery (18 UAV Bt) was also stationed at FOB Robinson, operating Desert Hawk UAVs, which were equipped with cameras to provide the coalition forces with a degree of situational awareness. A last reinforcement consisted of ten Engineers of 51 Squadron Royal Engineers (51 Sqn RE), who flew into FOB Robinson on 8 June, in order to improve the perimeter defences. The defences were fragile, and it had been an ongoing concern of the OMLT since arrival. The defence of FOB Robinson was a concern, as the FOBs was large, and the US-funded militia who was guarding the FOB took its leave as the British were not willing or able to pay for their services.⁹⁸ Moreover, the ANA contingent was rather small, leaving few ANA soldiers available for patrolling or other tasks than manning the sangars.⁹⁹ Together with the systemic unwillingness of the ANA to conduct a regular patrol scheme, very few ANA would actually patrol the streets of Sangin in 2006, often only contributing only six to eight soldiers to a patrol.

After Hammond returned to Bastion, the commanding officer of the infantry OMLT was Major Bristow, an individual augmentee to the OMLT and originally from the Scots Guards Regiment. Bristow had command experience as a company commander in the British Army, and was the senior kandak mentor, tasked with the mentoring of the kandak commander. In FOB Robinson, he was in charge of the day-to-day tactical control of the OMLT and reported directly to Hammond. The other British service members were not under his command, but he exerted what the Army call ‘tactical control,’ which comprises of the detailed and usually

94 <https://www.defense.gouv.fr/operations/missions-achevees/operation-pamir-2001-2014/in-memori-am/in-memori-am> accessed 25/02/2021; Bishop, 3 Para: Afghanistan, Summer 2006, 52. Tootal, *Danger Close: The True Story of Helmand from the Leader of 3 Para*. Tootal remembers three French service members being killed; the actual number was two.

95 Bristow, JDM Witness Statement, 2008.

96 Tootal, *Danger Close: The True Story of Helmand from the Leader of 3 Para*.

97 Defence, Short Convening Order for Board of Inquiry: Death of Cap JA Phillipson RA 555260 on 11 Jun 06, 13.

98 Docherty, *Desert of Death: A Soldier's Journey from Iraq to Afghanistan*.

99 A sangar is British military slang for a guard tower.

local direction and control of movements or manoeuvres necessary to accomplish missions or tasks assigned.¹⁰⁰ Bristow had no command or control over the US or Afghan forces, but would confer with them for their mutual interests. Although this is not an optimal situation, it was very common in Afghanistan when service members from different states were deployed within a single FOB.

In the afternoon of 11 June, the UAV troop reported that a Desert Hawk UAV had gone down on the far side of the Helmand River. Considered a useful asset, and unwilling to let the UAV to fall in enemy hands, Bristow retasked a patrol to recover the UAV. The patrol consisted of a combination of British service members from the OMLT, the UAV battery and ten to twelve soldiers from the RGR, totalling about twenty British soldiers in four ‘Snatch’ Land Rovers and one WMIK.¹⁰¹ Added to this patrol were twelve ANA soldiers in two Ford Ranger trucks.¹⁰² The patrol was under the overall command of an OMLT NCO and was known under the callsign 74H. Leaving FOB Robinson around 1800, the patrol drove towards a crossing point over the Helmand River, where part of the patrol dismounted. On foot, the British soldiers crossed the river and patrolled the area in search of the crashed UAV. The ANA and a few of the British soldiers stayed with the vehicle, effectively splitting the patrol into two parts. Unable to locate the UAV, a Sangin local informed the patrol that it had already been retrieved by “some guys in a pick-up.”¹⁰³ With reports coming in that Taliban forces were massing in Sangin and planning for an attack, the patrol returned to the vehicles and started the move back to FOB Robinson via the same route as the way up. At 2012, the patrol was contacted by Taliban forces with small arms fire and RPGs, and the contact report was sent to the operations room (ops) in FOB Robinson. During the initial engagement, one British service member was seriously wounded by a round to the chest. Unable to break contact, several vehicles were disabled by enemy fire. 74H was fixed by the enemy who requested assistance to break off the contact and to evacuate the wounded soldier to the hospital at Bastion.

At FOB Robinson, Bristow was quickly informed about the contact, and in response to the request for support by the patrol, he assembled a Quick Reaction Force (QRF). To Bristow’s knowledge, the situation of the patrol was “extremely tenuous,” so he mustered as large a

100 NATO AAP, “NATO Glossary of Terms and Definitions (English and French),” (NATO Standardization Agency (NSA), NATO Headquarters, Brussels, 2008).

101 The exact number of British and Afghan personnel on this patrol is hard to assess, as the two most authoritative documents on the topic, the two official inquiries into the death of Captain Philippson, contradict each other here. Interviewees have also not been able to confirm. See: British Ministry of Defence, Convening Order for Board of Inquiry: Death of Cap JA Philippson RA 555260 on 11 Jun 06, 14; Bourne-May, *Service Inquiry into the Death of 555260 Captain JA Philippson, 7th Parachute Regiment, Royal Horse Artillery (7 Para RHA)*, 9.

102 The number of ANA soldiers are validated by the sources available.

103 British Ministry of Defence, Convening Order for Board of Inquiry: Death of Cap JA Philippson RA 555260 on 11 Jun 06, 15.

force as possible, approximately forty to fifty men. Knowing that the Taliban were observing FOB Robinson, he anticipated that a sizeable QRF reinforcing the contacted patrol would encourage the Taliban to break the contact, allowing the QRF to retrieve the wounded soldier and return to FOB Robinson. Bristow was aware that 74H had crossed the river, and as such the patrol was limited in its ability to manoeuvre as it had the river to its back. Also, 74H was not staffed and equipped for close combat—a significant element of the patrol consisted of combat support/combat service support personnel—and the ANA were, as stated before, both underequipped and undertrained. Therefore, Bristow assumed that the patrol was in danger to be overrun, or at least to suffer more casualties as the contact protracted. At FOB Robinson, Bristow scrambled men from the OMLT, the ANA, 51 PARA Sqn RE and the Afghan Army, and quickly briefed them. The QRF would consist of two WMIKs, three Snatch Land Rovers, and two HMMWVs.

The top priority for Bristow was to support 74H in a speedy fashion, and in the rush to exit FOB Robinson, some mistakes were made. One of the HMMWVs got stuck in barbed wire at the main gate, and its occupants were still in the possession of the keys of two of the Snatch Land Rovers. Untangling the vehicle and returning to the Snatch Land Rovers with the keys took some time, and thus three of the vehicles ended up separated from the rest of the QRF. Although Bristow noticed the HMMWV was stuck, he wasn't at the time aware that the two Snatch Land Rovers were still at the FOB. Nonetheless, the QRF pushed quickly towards the contacted patrol, leaving the FOB at around 2030h. It took about half an hour to drive towards the patrol, as it was now fully dark; however, with a full moon there was ambient light to support vision. Unable to continue by vehicle, the QRF dismounted. Bristow put the patrol in an order of movement and ordered one person from each vehicle to stay with the vehicles. The route would be alongside a dirt track, described as "little more than a footpath, bordered intermittently by mud walls, trees or open scrubland Drainage ditches ran parallel."¹⁰⁴ Taking point, Bristow subsequently led the QRF towards 74H, patrolling westwards. Proceeding cautiously, the QRF moved for about 300 m in a staggered formation before they stopped an Afghan local on a motorbike who was driving towards them. Although no useful information was unearthed in the subsequent interrogation—the local Afghan claimed to have no knowledge on any Taliban activity, despite coming from the direction of the contact—the ANA attached to the patrol returned to their vehicles after they had continued the interrogation as the QRF pushed further west, at that time unbeknown to the British. The QRF continued, and after another 300 m, Bristow observed about a dozen armed men about 30 m in front of him and alerted the QRF via his Personal Role Radio (PRR). The QRF went down, taking firing positions along the track they were moving on, still in a staggered formation. Bristow verbally challenged the group and quickly fired off a few rounds with his rifle. The contacted Taliban returned with a barrage of fire. The weight of

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¹⁰⁴ Ibid., 18.

fire that the Taliban were able to put down on the QRF was far greater than the QRF was able to return, as the QRF was not deployed in the direction of the contact, and due to the heavy barrage were fixed in their positions. It was in this initial exchange of fire that one of the OMLT officers, captain Jim Philippson, was hit in the head, killing him at around 2145 hours. In the subsequent confusion, the entire QRF took cover in a drainage ditch to their left. Unable to deploy to meet the enemy up front, and already sustaining a casualty, Bristow ordered a withdrawal through the ditch back to the east. The machine gunner of the QRF, further down the order of movement, was ordered up to engage the enemy and suppress their fire and ability to move. Still under raking fire, the QRF had to guide Philippson's body through a sewerage tunnel intersecting the ditch, which took both time and effort. Bristow disregarded demands to leave the body by a senior NCO of 51 Sqn RE, and the QRF proceeded to retreat eastwards, carrying along the body of Phillipson, using a smoke grenade to obscure its movement. Most of the 51 Sqn RE had already progressed to the vehicles, leaving the retrieval of Philippson's body to the other members of the QRF. Upon arrival at the vehicles, the QRF loaded Philippson's body onto one of the HMMWS and subsequently returned to FOB Robinson.

At FOB Robinson, the body of Philippson was unloaded; however, 74H was still in contact, and the casualty that had been sustained urgently needed evacuation. Bristow assembled a second QRF to extract the wounded soldier, but by now most of the 51 Sqn RE were unwilling to join the second QRF. The second QRF was subsequently reinforced with a number of 18 UAV Bt's men. In their second attempt to marry up with the fixed patrol, the QRF was again contacted by the Taliban, seriously wounding one of the 18 UAV Bt's NCOs. Still, the QRF was able to join the ranks with 74H. Eventually, a Medevac helicopter was dispatched from Bastion, evacuating both wounded. Bristow, who had been asking for additional support from the 3 PARA Battlegroup, as well as additional ammunition, was thoroughly displeased as the incoming helicopters did not carry either, and the joined-up force went firm during the night. The next morning, B Company, 3 PARA, was flown in to escort both 74H as well as the QRF back to FOB Robinson, although by then the contact had petered out, and the return was uneventful.

After the incident, the ANA and the OMLT would stay in Sangin, although eventually, the HTF had to reinforce the Sangin Valley with a full company, taking over FOB Robinson and the Sangin district centre. The 3 PARA subunit would be in Sangin for the rest of the deployment, mostly in a pitched battle against Taliban forces.¹⁰⁵

The HERRICK 4 OMLT was the first of its kind, and during the execution of the deployment, a number of lessons were identified, which formed the basis of adaptation later in the

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¹⁰⁵ Bishop, *3 Para: Afghanistan, Summer 2006*, 108–20.

campaign. These lessons revolve around several observations. The first of these observations is the gargantuan gap in military capability between the ANSF and the British Army. This gap includes equipment, but also leadership and individual military skills. The second observation is the absence of oversight and guidance with regard to the OMLT. The operational and tactical end state of the OMLT efforts were unknown to the participants, and this led to the appraisal of efforts at an individual level, not necessarily in line with the HTF, the ANA or indeed the Battlegroup. Lastly, the HERRICK 4 OMLT was redirected from their initial assignment, resulting in a disparity between tasks, staffing and equipment. Translated into the fundamentals of military operation, the principles of war as described in the British Army Doctrine, these observations translate into a lack of unity of command, unity of effort and lack of security.

The HERRICK 4 OMLT had thus been set up with severe deficiencies. The most pressing issues included the lack of unity of effort, and the lack of unity of command and security, which were in part the result of the deviation from the initial task of the OMLT. The former is exemplified by the ANA, who were especially reluctant to close in with the Taliban forces on several occasions. This left the ANP and the British mentors exposed to the Taliban who were able to concentrate on the exposed elements. During both the operations in Sangin, as well as during Operation SARWE—a later operation near Garmsir in the south of Helmand—the OMLT held no formal command relationship over the Afghan forces or any of the British forces that were committed to the same patrols. Senior Afghan officers also outranked the British officers, removing any authority the British officers might derive from holding a higher rank. This led to prolonged and heated discussions between the British and the ANA regarding their combat efforts. Moreover, the OMLT had no authority to task the supporting forces, who remained under higher command during the operations. In the six-month tour, the OMLT would have to provide their own security, which especially left the Garmsir operation spread thin as they had very little redundancy, and were almost completely reliant on air power for support. An irregularity within the HTF, the OMLT perceived little support from the Battlegroup or the HTF staff.

Having identified the conceptual and organisational deficiencies of the OMLT during Herrick 4, the tactical decision-making of the British commanders should be reviewed in this light. Bristow attempted to circumvent the command and control issues by leading from the front, taking point to support a patrol in contact. With few reinforcements available, every effort was made to reach the objectives using the means at the commander's disposal. The British approach to mentoring thus quickly changed from 'leading from the back' to 'leading from the front' to essentially doing it yourself.

The lessons identified by the combat mentors in 2006 were implemented in later rotations, which arrived in Helmand with better equipment, and were formed around the command

structure of an infantry battalion, rather than a combat support unit. Moreover, the place of the combat mentor shifted from the front, to the back, and in the later HERRICK rotations, to the side in an observing and advisory role.

3.2.2 OMLT HERRICK 5: 45 Royal Marine Commando.

The successors of 16 AAB were drawn from the other high-readiness force of the British Armed Forces; 3 Commando Brigade (3 Cdo), the main manoeuvre formation of the Royal Marines. For this rotation, the recommendations made by 7 RHA to ensure that the OMLT would be formed around an infantry battalion, including its equipment table, were followed. The commanding officer of 3 Cdo, then Brigadier Jerry Thomas, had to decide which of his battalions would be assigned the ground-holding role and the mentoring tasks respectively. As 3 PARA encountered unexpectedly stiff resistance from Taliban forces and it became clear to 3 Cdo that Operation Herrick would constitute heavy fighting as 3 Cdo's pre-deployment training progressed, the decision was highly important to those involved. The two battalions involved, 42 Commando and 45 Commando, were both keen to perform the ground-holding role, as it was perceived that fighting the Taliban would be a more glamorous deployment than mentoring the nascent Afghan National Security Forces.¹⁰⁶ As it were, 42 Commando was assigned the ground-holding role, to the resentment of 45. 45 Commando officers commented that "42 got the warfighting role, 45 got the babysitting role," and "being a minder was not what many in the unit had envisaged themselves doing on operations."¹⁰⁷ Thomas however had several reasons for his choice. The commanding officer of 45 had been switched to Lieutenant Colonel Duncan Dewar in April 2006, and as such he was a recent addition to the brigade. Moreover, Dewar was considered by Thomas to be more culturally aware and possess more soft skills than the commanding officer of 42 Commando, who had earned his stripes as a combat officer, and was known for his offensive mindset.¹⁰⁸ Also, 42 Commando was quartered in Plymouth, England, in the same barracks as HQ 3 Cdo. 45 Commando, on the other hand, was quartered in Arbroath, Scotland, making it easier for the CO of 42 Commando to step forward to the CO of 3 Cdo to present his battalion as ready for combat. Dewar, however conscious on the importance of mentorship during counterinsurgency operations, also recognised that the OMLT job was not looked at favourably by his men, as he considered that everybody wanted to fight, and not to be included in the OMLT. The OMLT was considered a sideline job.¹⁰⁹

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106 Interview UK CO OMLT 28, 28/08/2020.

107 Interview UK Marine OMLT 50, 03/03/2021; P. Gadie, "COIN Operations in Kandahar and Helmand – A Multi-National Template?," *Globe and Laurel* (July/August 2007): 275.

108 Interview UK CO OMLT 28, 28/08/2020; Interview UK CO HTF 4, 17/09/2020.

109 Interview UK CO OMLT 28, 28/08/2020.

Unsure on the role of the OMLT, 45 Commando continued its pre-deployment training in preparation of their HERRICK 5 deployment. Early expectations included “images of Lawrence of Arabia-style operations with battle-hardened Afghan hill tribesmen”;¹¹⁰ however, most officers concluded that “none of us was sure what is meant [to be an OMLT], but it did not take too much effort to work out that it was going to be something different.”¹¹¹ As little institutional knowledge was present on the details of the OMLT work, 45 Commando re-orbatted to its best knowledge, detaching two of its companies to the HTF, as well as its reconnaissance troop. The skeleton staff would then reorganise into four OMLTs, each assigned to mentor an Afghan kandak: three Infantry kandaks and a Logistics kandak, as well as a force protection element.¹¹²

In order to make sure that the HOTO between 7 RHA and 45 Cdo would progress smoothly, a small vanguard was deployed prior to the main body of 45 Cdo. However, the small detachment first had to pick up a new ANA battalion from the Kabul Military Training Centre in Kabul. After it was decided that 470 Afghan officers and men would be made available for duty in Helmand, the newly christened 3rd kandak of the 3rd Brigade, 205 Corps would be transferred to Camp Bastion via air transport. At Bastion, the vanguard had a few days with the men from the 7 RHA OMLT to gain some “ground truths on how things were working before the main body arrived.”¹¹³ It was decided that the first 45 Cdo OMLT team, OMLT A, would relieve the 7 RHA OMLT at the various location, which at the time included Now Zad, Kajaki, Sangin, FOB Robinson, Gereshk, Lashkar Ghar as well as the Lashkar Ghar Mobile Operations Group.¹¹⁴ The Mobile Operations Group (MOG) were part of 3 Cdo’s campaign plan, as Brigadier Thomas intended to “unfix the north and manoeuvre to threaten, disrupt and interdict the enemy.” Therefore, 3 Cdo created several MOGs. A MOG would consist of “250-strong flying columns in 40 vehicles (a mix of Vikings and Land Rovers)—which were tasked with seeking out and engaging the Taliban.”¹¹⁵ 3 Cdo had drawn a parallel with its core competency of amphibious warfare by conceiving the Helmand desert as a ‘sea,’ through which MOGs could “roam wide and hunt down the enemy.”¹¹⁶

110 L. Stallard, “Op Herrick and the RMR,” *Globe and Laurel* (March/April 2007): 6–97.

111 S. Kelly, “Logistic Company meets CSS kandak,” *Globe and Laurel* (January/February 2007).

112 D. Thornton, “The Operational Mentoring and Liaison Team,” *Globe and Laurel* (July/August 2006); E. Reed, “The Blind Leading the Blind,” *Globe and Laurel* (March/April 2007): 97.

113 GBR 50, “OMLT A,” *Globe and Laurel* (November/December (2006).

114 GBR 50, “OMLT A,” 429.

115 Theo Farrell, “Improving in War: Military Adaptation and the British in Helmand Province, Afghanistan, 2006–2009,” *The Journal of Strategic Studies* 33, no. 4 (2010): 576.

116 Farrell, “Improving in War,” 576.

Parallel to the rapid deployment of OMLT A to the different locations in Helmand, the OMLT B and C detachments started in Shorabak, in an attempt to organise the Afghan Army, as nobody seemed to have a grasp of the location of personnel, weapons and equipment. One NCO commented that “most people will be familiar with the expression ‘in the right place, at the right time, with the right equipment,’ and it can be said that all three of these principles can be applied to the ANA and the interpreters, but definitely not at the same time. So the next few weeks were spent trying to get men and equipment in the same place at something like the right time.”¹¹⁷

The Royal Marines set up a training cycle for the ANA including marksmanship, driving, signals and mine awareness, although it turned out to be a frustrating effort at times as Ramadan affected the “already limited” work rate, and “no patching was required” at the firing range, indicating low marksmanship skills.¹¹⁸ As the first reports came in from OMLT A of combat and casualties, the OMLT B and C detachments were also quick to integrate individual team training for the OMLT itself, including care under fire and calling in air and casualty evacuation. OMLTs B and C would only spend a few weeks in Shorabak, as the tactical situation demanded the OMLTs to deploy to the various combat outposts in Helmand. Already after six weeks, the opportunity arose for OMLT B to attach themselves to a MOG, heading for Garmsir.¹¹⁹ In the south of the province, the MOG would conduct a routing of joint UK/ANA patrols, supporting ANSF forces in conducting vehicle checkpoints, village clearances and some deliberate operations.¹²⁰

An outstanding operation for the HERRICK 5 OMLT was Operation Baaz Tsuka, in which the ANA battalion that had arrived in Helmand was ordered to take part in a large Canadian-led clearing operation in Kandahar province. As the OMLT accompanied the Afghan Forces, the Royal Marines conducted a road move to Kandahar to join the US 1st Battalion, 3rd American Special Forces Group (Army) to support the clearing operation.¹²¹ During the road move, the ANA/OMLT were engaged by Taliban forces repeatedly, and as they arrived in Kandahar, the US SF detachment was highly reluctant to engage with the ANA forces, emphasising the importance of the ability to liaise between the forces. Still, after a week-long battle, a large area had been cleared of Taliban presence, and over eighty enemies were confirmed dead, with no losses to coalition troops or the ANA. Upon return, the ANA battalion was immediately reassigned to the ADZ in Lashkar Ghar.

117 Sergeant Hernamen, “OMLT B,” *Globe and Laurel* (November/December 2006).

118 Hernamen, “OMLT B,” 429.

119 Corporal Harris, “OMLT Mobile Outreach Group, the Short-Range, Non-sustainable Desert Group,” *Globe and Laurel* (January/February 2007).

120 Harris, “OMLT Mobile Outreach Group, the Short-Range, Non-sustainable Desert Group,” 12.

121 Gadie, “COIN Operations in Kandahar and Helmand,” 275.

Although the ANA commitment did result in some operational accomplishments, the OMLT deployment was frustrating for many Royal Marine officers and men. The commanding officer of the OMLT, Lieutenant Colonel Dewar, was frustrated by the lack of strategic importance given to the development of the Afghan armed forces.¹²² Similarly, Brigadier Thomas remembered that he “would see CO OMLT and would walk out of the meeting with bleeding ears, and all he could report was a litany of problems. No uniforms, no discipline, payment issues, no ammunition, corruption, food issues. The OMLT job wasn’t just teaching the Afghans how to be good soldiers, it was also a cultural ethos problem. The officers were institutionally corrupt, stealing ammo from the Army and selling it to the Taliban.”¹²³ The sentiment was shared by subordinate soldiers, as the British elite soldiers had trouble dealing with the lower standards and corruption of the ANA:

My faith in the ANA became stretched to breaking point when one of the ANA commanders proceeded to try and strike a deal with the local Taliban. Food and safe passage in return for British night vision gear and weapons. Needless to say, he was quickly removed. [...] As it is now at the five-month point of the tour, I can say on reflection that this has been a hoofing. If at times very frustrating deployment. Time and again, the ANA seem to try their best to rub their mentors up the wrong way, even when performing the simplest soldiering jobs. However, patience is a virtue and with time the OMLT had made progress in helping their planning and execution of operations. Many years of mentoring lay ahead, but for now a start has been made and when this is added to the Afghan willingness to fight the Taliban it makes for a healthy one too.¹²⁴

In conclusion, the Royal Marines had experienced an unusual tour, performing a task that was perceived as less glamorous than the ground-holding 42 Commando had been assigned to. The ANA was growing quickly in numbers, but the quality of soldiering was still well below what professional soldiers would consider acceptable. Moreover, the HERRICK 5 deployment was still quite focused on the British doing the fighting, and the Afghans were considered to be more of a nuisance than an asset.¹²⁵ Tellingly, the Operation Glacier series—a sequence of sizable operations in Helmand initiated and executed by 3 Cdo—had scant ANA participation.¹²⁶ As a result, the relationship between the Afghan Brigadier and senior British leadership had some room for improvement, as the ANA Brigadier considered the Afghanistan War to be an Afghan fight and he was at times at odds with the British

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122 Interview UK CO OMLT 28, 28/08/2020.

123 Interview UK CO HTF 4, 17/09/2020.

124 Stallard, “Op Herrick and the RMR.”

125 Interview UK CO OMLT 28, 28/08/2020; Interview UK OMLT mentor 50, 03/03/2021.

126 Ewen Southby-Tailyour, “Commando Brigade: Helmand,” *Afghanistan Sometimes the Best*.

approach.¹²⁷ Also, no mutual trust was yet present between the ANA troops and the Royal Marines, especially between 42 Commando and the Afghan forces. Still, as 45 Commando prepared to transfer the OMLT responsibilities to the Grenadier Guards, the incumbent OMLT generally agreed that although frustrating, a base had been laid down for the Grenadier Guards to build on, as some improvement had been made. A Royal Marine officer observed that “the (ANA) Brigade now has a rudimentary understanding of the American Estimate process, a working Ops room and even a couple more maps. Unquestionably, there is a long way still to go, but the OMLT will be handling on an ANA Brigade that has made substantial progress since our arrival.”¹²⁸

3.2.3 OMLT HERRICK 6: 1st Battalion The Grenadier Guards

45 Cdo’s successors were the 1st Battalion of the Grenadier Guards regiment, who had just returned from an impromptu deployment to Iraq for Operation TELIC, and as a result, were quite unexpectant of the OMLT deployment in 2007.¹²⁹ As a consequence, the “the battalions preparation was severely restricted [because of the unscheduled tour in Iraq] and had a very limited period of six months to transition into 12 Mechanised Brigade—the brigade the HERRICK 6 deployment was formed around—and prepare for the OMLT role. As the Grenadier Guards battalion had a reduced use for its private soldiers—the OMLT needed experienced NCOs and officers to mentor the ANA—the battalion reorganised the men into three OMLT companies: The Queen’s Company OMLT, No. 2 Company OMLT and Inkerman Company OMLT. The soldiers not needed in the OMLT force table were transformed into a fourth rifle company, No 3. Company Group and the Brigade Reconnaissance Force were reinforced with Grenadier Guard service members.¹³⁰ The CO of the Grenadier Guards had intended to use this fourth company for “mobile reconnaissance or counter-attack force if the situation so demanded”; however, this fourth company was usurped by the CO of the Helmand Task Force and subordinated to a ground-holding battalion.¹³¹ This withheld the CO of its own manoeuvre capacity within the OMLT battlegroup, having to rely more on the ground-holding Battalions to reinforce the OMLT/ANA when needed.

The CO stated that he reorganised the battalion “much like the New Zealand and UK Special Air Service had in Malaya, Borneo, Radfan, etc.”¹³² As such, the companies assigned for OMLT duties were smaller, but NCO-heavy, as that was considered necessary to work with the ANA. As it were, each ANA kandak was mentored by a thirty-eight-strong OMLT company, with

127 Interview UK CO OMLT 28, 28/08/2020; Interview UK OMLT mentor 50, 03/03/2021.

128 Reed, “The Blind Leading the Blind,” 96.

129 Email correspondence GBR OMLT officer 29.

130 A. Ogden, *Grenadier Guards, an Account of Operations 1996–2015* (Nine Elms Books Ltd, 2019), 144–87.

131 Email correspondence UK CO OMLT 25, 20/09/2020; Ogden, *Grenadier Guards, an Account of Operations 1996–2015*, 171.

132 Email correspondence UK CO OMLT 25, 20/09/2020.

the Combat Support and Combat Service Support kandaks assigned a forty- and forty-two-men strong OMLT respectively. Lastly, thirty-five officers and NCOs would mentor the ANA Brigade staff.¹³³

Even though the OMLT was entering its third rotation, the OMLT concept had not yet found its footing in the pre-deployment mission-specific training. A section in Patrick Hennessey's book on his OMLT experiences whilst preparing for deployment to Helmand as a Grenadier Guard officer gives a good impression of the rather improvised nature of the third rotation of British OMLTs:

In the UK on pre-deployment training, we had no Afghans to train with, so laughably, worryingly, we couldn't train at all. Initially, we just had to pretend; we'd push out on patrols on across the training area and get told off for driving too quickly because we weren't allowing for the imaginary six ANA vehicles we were meant to pretend were following our own. We knew that the language barrier was going to be a massive problem, so everyone took an aptitude test, and the bright ones went on intensive Dari and Pashtun courses—but the courses clashed with training, so we didn't see them again till we got to Helmand and, in the meantime, a pretend interpreter had to pretend to talk to the pretend Afghans. When we finally got some demo troops they were cheerful cheeky Yorkshire lads from the Duke of Wellington's Regiment, who had obviously just finished playing Iraqis for a previous exercise and spent the whole week pretending to be Jaish al-Mahdi, running around the training area in tracksuits and dis-dashes shouting 'Ali Baba.' It would have been funny if it wasn't so surreal; British soldiers pretending to be Afghan soldiers but who'd spent so long pretending to be Iraqi insurgents that they kept forgetting whether they were meant to pretend to be fighting us or fighting for us. On Salisbury Plain [...] we were allocated a company of Gurkhas to 'play' the ANA. This was an improvement of some sort; the [...] Gurkhas had all been instructed not to respond to any orders given in English, to pretend they couldn't understand until whatever had been said was translated by a sergeant. The problem was that the Gurkhas are just too damn good at soldiering; it's second nature to them and, try as they might, they just couldn't do it badly.¹³⁴

Moreover, the OMLT was also not prioritised by 12 Brigade, as according to the Grenadier Guards CO,

the Brigade didn't really know what to do with us as they were more concerned with fighting the Taliban than building or integrating the ANA. [...] An example would be that during the large set-piece finale to the Brigade exercise at the last big Orders Group, I had got frustrated,

¹³³ Ogden, *Grenadier Guards, an Account of Operations 1996–2015*, 142.

¹³⁴ Patrick Hennessey, *Kandak: Fighting with Afghans* (Penguin UK, 2012), 31–32.

but asked calmly at the end during questions what they wanted the OMLT and ANA to do as they had been left out of the plan completely.¹³⁵

The second-tier nature of the OMLT within 12 Brigade was translated into how the ANA and OMLTs were treated by the ground-holding battalions and the HTF staff. The OMLT would have to actually spend time explaining why the ANA should be included in operations.¹³⁶

Moreover, Hennessey observed that the OMLT role was disregarded by the Grenadier Guards themselves prior to the deployment. Most in the battalion were not keen on the experimental role in a broken-up setting, adhering to different chains of command. The idiosyncrasies of the ANA were by now well known in Britain, and as such working with the ANA, considered maverick and dangerous, was not considered favourably.¹³⁷ The ground-holding role on the contrary was considered more glamorous and worthwhile.

Moreover, the exact nature of the OMLT role was uncertain. Officers of the Grenadier Guards observed a void in the tactical know-how of the in-country (Afghanistan) OMLT, which was considered to be uncertain and ever-changing.¹³⁸ Although the Grenadier Guards did contact 7 RHA and 45 Cdo in order to absorb their experiences, the biannual change in campaign plan in combination with the growth of the ANA in Helmand made for a changed environment in every respect.

The CO of the Grenadier Guards aimed to deviate from his predecessors' approach in that he decided to change the way the British and the ANA would partner. Where in his perception 7 RHA and 45 Cdo had limited the integration by setting up a training camp for the ANA and subsequently sending them out on operations with a few operational attachments from the 3 PARA or 42 Cdo combat group, he aimed to allocate an OMLT company to an ANA battalion from the moment of arrival in Helmand province, and then have them stay together during training, fighting and recuperation throughout the tour.¹³⁹ In his view, this would prevent the unwanted situation that had occurred during the previous tours the British and Afghan soldiers would only meet at the start of the operation. The influx of more ANA personnel in the execution of the HERRICK 6 OMLT allowed for this approach, even though the ANA Brigades' remained "historically undermanned," partly due to desertion.¹⁴⁰

135 Email correspondence UK OMLT CO 25, 20/09/2020.

136 Ogden, *Grenadier Guards, an Account of Operations 1996–2015*, 138.

137 Interview UK OMLT mentor 37, 23/07/2021; Ogden, *Grenadier Guards, an Account of Operations 1996–2015*, 138.

138 Email correspondence UK OMLT mentor 29, 09/11/2020.

139 Email correspondence UK CO OMLT 25, 20/09/2020; Ogden, *Grenadier Guards, an Account of Operations 1996–2015*, 141.

140 Interview UK OMLT mentor 37, 23/07/2021.

Also, the Grenadier Guards attempted to deviate from “reporting how many Taliban we had killed” to other measurements of success, focused on observations concerning the quality of life of the Helmandi population, including healthcare, education and economic progress.¹⁴¹ These attempts to focus on a more population-centric line of operations were conducted as 12 Brigade was conducting a series of clearing operations against Taliban-held areas. These operations were later described by Brigadier Lorimer, the CO of the HTF as “mowing the lawn,” signalling the repetitive nature of these operations.¹⁴² In order to maintain a permanent presence in the cleared areas, the ANA and OMLT were ordered to occupy a number of combat outposts that were constructed in the aftermath of the fighting.¹⁴³

Thus, as Lorimer carefully avoided the British forces to become fixed like during HERRICK 4, it left the ANA, and by extension, the OMLT, in static locations as the patrol bases were constructed. This led the OMLT and ANA to become stretched: the OMLT was “always short on vehicles” which restricted their movements, and mentoring was done during the fighting, rather than “from a distance.”¹⁴⁴ Although this was considered effective, it led to a high attrition rate, and patrols were conducted on minimum manning throughout the rest of the tour. Indicative of the operational stretch is a quote in the Grenadier Guards’ Account of Operations: “not only did the OMLTs have to defend their bases but also had to conduct regular patrols with the ANA and the British Company. This meant a 24-hour cycle of activity with little sleep. For example, due to high threat levels, the six-man OMLT in PB Tangiers was required to conduct its own sentry duty at night since the ANA could not be relied on to stay awake.”¹⁴⁵ Again, with the lack of resources and the isolated position the OMLT found itself in, it was perceived that the OMLT/ANA were not seen as a priority.¹⁴⁶

Still, the ANA/OMLT achieved a milestone during HERRICK 6: during one of the larger clearing operations, dubbed Operation Silicon, from 29 April to 6 May 2007, the ANA operated independently, with only the British mentoring team to support their efforts. With companies of the Royal Anglians on the ANA flanks, the OMLT again had to split its efforts between mentoring the ANA and liaising with the British forces in order to avoid any blue-on-blue incidents. Operation Silicon aimed to clear the Taliban from the Lower

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141 Email correspondence UK CO OMLT 25, 20/09/2020.

142 Farrell, *Unwinnable: Britain's war in Afghanistan, 2001–2014*, 205; Anthony King, “Understanding the Helmand Campaign: British Military Operations in Afghanistan,” *International Affairs* (Royal Institute of International Affairs) 86, no. 2 (2010): 317, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40664069>.

143 Farrell, *Unwinnable: Britain's War in Afghanistan, 2001–2014*, 203; Ogden, *Grenadier Guards, an Account of Operations 1996–2015*, 166.

144 Email correspondence UK OMLT mentor 29, 09/11/2020.

145 Ogden, *Grenadier Guards, an Account of Operations 1996–2015*, 156.

146 Email correspondence UK OMLT mentor 29, 09/11/2020.

Sangin Valley from the town of Gareshk towards Sangin itself. In the end, the 1st kandak was assigned to assist in the clearing, despite half of the kandak's personnel having deserted or was otherwise not present.¹⁴⁷ Despite the OMLT's best intentions, the collaboration between the ANA and the British Forces remained strained. One British OMLT company commander observed the absence of his Afghan peer during combat and remarked that "as the ANA commander managed to locate himself to the safer rear areas most of the time, the British had to command the ANA."¹⁴⁸ Indeed, most British officers not directly attached to the OMLT still had significant reservations with regard to the ANA's loyalty, soldiering skills and command and control.¹⁴⁹

By the end of the tour, the Grenadier Guards OMLT had participated in multiple larger Task Force-led operations and conducted a plethora of foot patrols from the combat outposts and patrol bases that had been established in the wake of the larger clearing operations. The incumbents handed over to their successors of 2 YORKS in September 2007. Concurrently, Brigadier Lorimer handed over command of HTF to the CO of 52 Brigade.

3.2.4 OMLT HERRICK 7: 2nd Battalion The Yorkshire Regiment

The British fourth rotation in Helmand was structured around the staff of 52 Brigade, commanded by Brigadier Andrew Mackay. 52 Brigade was a 'type B' Brigade, indicating that the Brigade was not intended to be deployed, but solely held a regional responsibility in the sense that the Brigade provided logistical and administrative support to five regimental battalions in Britain.¹⁵⁰ Over the next year, Mackay saw his Brigade staff grow from fifteen personnel at the time of the decision to make 52 Brigade deployable, to 175 by the time the Brigade reached the theatre.¹⁵¹ Ultimately, the British would deploy 7,750 personnel in Helmand for HERRICK 7, about 1,250 more than during the sixth iteration.

Diverting from the policy of his predecessors, Mackay's approach focused on winning over the local population, instead of defeating the insurgency. This approach was based on MacKay's understanding of the British campaign in Malaya, but also on the ideas put forward in the latest American Field Manual on Counterinsurgency, FM 3-24. The driving force behind FM 3-24, US General David Petraeus, had been Mackay's superior officer in Iraq, and as such

147 Patrick Hennessey, *The Junior Officers' Reading Club: Killing Time and Fighting Wars* (Penguin UK, 2009).

148 Ben Anderson, *No Worse Enemy: The Inside Story of the Chaotic Struggle for Afghanistan* (Oneworld Publications, 2011), 41–42.

149 Anderson, *No Worse Enemy: The Inside Story of the Chaotic Struggle for Afghanistan*, 21, 25–26; Email correspondence UK 09/11/2020; Email correspondence UK CO OMLT 20/09/2020; Hennessey, *Kandak: Fighting with Afghans*, 252–54; Ogden, *Grenadier Guards, an Account of Operations 1996–2015*, 138.

150 Farrell, *Unwinnable: Britain's War in Afghanistan, 2001–2014*, 207.

151 Andrew MacKay, "Post-deployment Interview CO HERRICK 7," interview by Brigadier (Ret.) I. A. Johnstone, 2008.

Mackay had the opportunity to receive a pre-publication copy of the manual in 2006.¹⁵² Impressed with the US ongoing debate on COIN, which included the classical COIN theorists but also the input of neo-classical COIN scholars such as David Kilcullen and John Nagl, Mackay implemented the ideas in the FM he felt was useful in the Afghan context, discarding the parts he considered were less useful.¹⁵³ These included the aim to use a minimal amount of force, a focus on the development of the ANSF and most importantly, the recognition that the insurgents did not have to be defeated, but rather had to be made insignificant by gaining the population's support.¹⁵⁴

Important to the OMLT, it was also the first time that a Task Force Helmand CO prioritised the role of the OMLT and the ANA within the campaign plan. For HERRICK 7, the OMLT had formed around the Second Battalion, the Yorkshire Regiment, or 2 YORKS. 2 YORKS commanding officer Lt. Col. Simon Downey recalled that “he (Mackay) had spent a lot of his career on thinking on how to mentor indigenous forces. He was committed to how you could deliver a COIN approach through those indigenous forces.”¹⁵⁵ MacKay was convinced that the right way to operate in Helmand was to deviate from his direct predecessor. “[2 YORKS had to function] as a partner of the ANA and deliver a solution through our presence.”¹⁵⁶ To that end, Mackay formulated 2 YORKS' orders to “train, mentor and strike in support of 3/205 Brigade to deliver this Brigade as an operationally proven, self-supporting combined arms brigade.”¹⁵⁷ The purpose of this was to do this through a “proper COIN approach” where 2 YORKS would empower and enable indigenous forces.¹⁵⁸

With the Helmand OMLT in its fourth iteration, 2 YORKS could draw on the experiences of both the Paras as well as the Marines, with both units back in the UK as the Grenadier Guards were in theatre. Moreover, 2 YORKS' leadership visited the incumbent OMLT in Helmand, and used that experience to put together a pre-deployment training programme themselves, and tried to make that bespoke within the standard preparation package in which 52 Brig was deployed. This included centralised lectures by Lt. Col. Tootal, and representatives from 45 Cdo.¹⁵⁹ Still, the CO of 2 YORKS had some difficulty in gaining full situational awareness with regard to the ground truth in Afghanistan during the pre-deployment phase. A formal

152 Interview UK CO HTF 2, 28/10/2020; Farrell, *Unwinnable: Britain's War in Afghanistan, 2001–2014*, 211.

153 Interview UK CO HTF 2, 28/10/2020.

154 A. D. MacKay, “Counterinsurgency in Helmand; Task Force Operational Design,” 2007, Lashkar Gah.

155 Interview UK CO OMLT 1, 11/09/2020.

156 Ibid.

157 Ibid.

158 MacKay, “Counterinsurgency in Helmand; Task Force Operational Design,” 1; Interview UK CO OMLT 1, 11/09/2020.

159 P. M. J. Cowell, “Training For OMLT Team on OP HERRICK 6,” *Infantryman* (2007), 83. NB: Although the author of this article was training for HERRICK 7, the title of the article refers mistakenly to HERRICK 6.

way by which info was coming out of the theatre in a way that it could be understood was still largely absent, and the understanding of in-theatre dynamics regularly was built around a person's network, specifically with regards to "whom you knew who was out there."¹⁶⁰ Based on 2 YORKS' understanding of its future role as an OMLT, supplemented by knowledge on COIN by both the classical theorists as well as contemporary writings such as the FM 3-24, 2 YORKS developed its own rudimentary conceptualisation of OMLT-type work, using a stick person—aptly named 'Ali the Afghan'—as a metaphor. Using this metaphor, the head represented the British understanding and approach of the Afghan context and the Afghan perception of leadership. The arms symbolised a carrot and stick, with the stick referring to all types of operations, both kinetic and non-kinetic, with the target on the horizon, being the future improvements to Afghan society, represented by the carrot. The body stood for the core of the issue: maintaining consent and legitimacy, understanding local issues and developing indigenous forces. Lastly, the legs represented the OMLT and other security sector reform initiatives; it was used to "get things moving."¹⁶¹

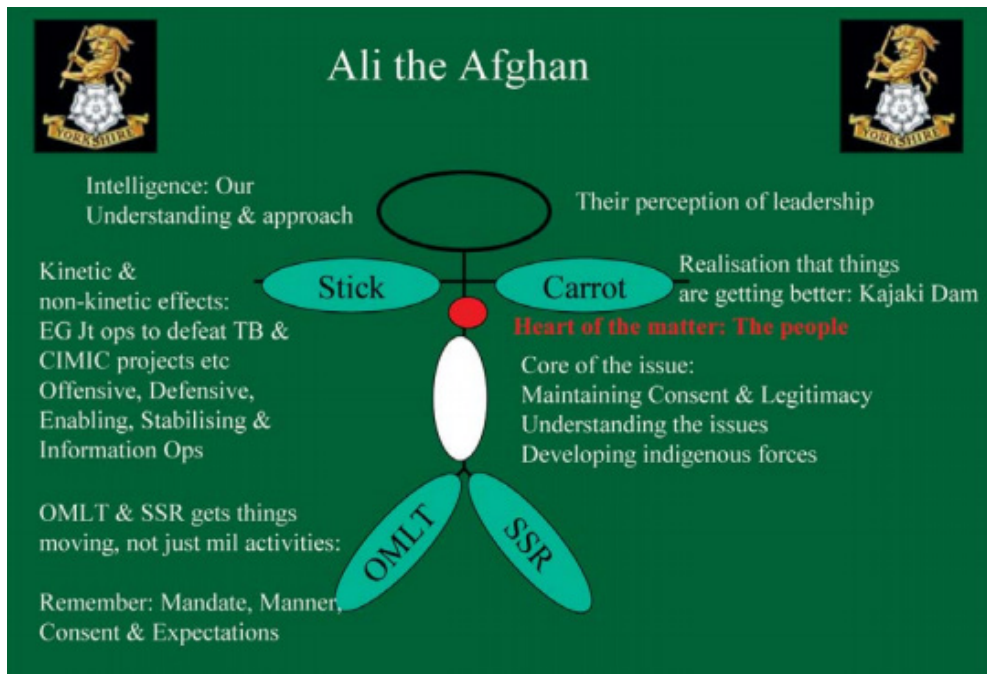


Figure 1: Conceptualisation of the OMLT role by 2 YORKS, HERRICK 7. Source: Cowell, P. M. J. "Training For OMLT Team on OP HERRICK 6," *Infantryman* (2007).

¹⁶⁰ Interview UK CO OMLT 1, 11/09/2020.

¹⁶¹ Cowell, "Training For OMLT Team on OP HERRICK 6," 82.

As 2 YORKS reorganised to a similar force structure as the incumbent Grenadier Guards, the informal network of the CO and others indeed proved valuable. In order to augment his Battalion and to enable bespoke training, the CO contacted his network, including officers who commanded the Para Battalions and Marine Commandos, as equipment—such as radios, vehicles and weapon systems—was available with those units. Under a gentleman's agreement, equipment was lent out, so 2 YORKS could start training. As the Battalion “needed to be skilled on a range of different equipment, including sat phones, specialist vehicles and specialist weapons,” and none were available during the preparation phase, lending equipment was considered necessary.¹⁶² After several months of training, the CO felt that 2 YORKS had reached an acceptable level of training, however mostly as a result of intra-battalion initiatives, and a distinct focus on soldier skills, including marksmanship, physical fitness and care under fire.¹⁶³ By this time, the British Operational Training and Advisory Group (OPTAG)—the British organisation charged with the delivery of pre-operational deployment training to all Army and Royal Marine Units—had begun to adapt to the realities of the War in Afghanistan.¹⁶⁴ As a result, some bespoke OMLT training package was delivered by OPTAG; however, it occurred after 2 YORKS had already conducted a significant amount of self-generated training, and as such, it was considered an overdue effort.¹⁶⁵ Similar to the Grenadier Guards in their preparation for HERRICK 6, 2 YORKS were also allotted a platoon of Gurkha Rifles in a role-playing fashion, generating the same limited results as its predecessors, but the necessity of high-quality role play was again stressed by 2 YORKS to OPTAG.¹⁶⁶

Upon arrival, HERRICK 7 inherited from 12 Brigade a province that was ravished by a series of clearing operations as described in the preceding sections. Mackay observed that “half of it [the province] was trashed, [...] Now Zad had become a ghost town, and [...] Sangin was a disaster, as the town centre had been destroyed by British artillery and NATO air power.”¹⁶⁷ In line with his conviction that the population was the ‘prize,’ MacKay ordered a series of changes regarding the British approach, including the distinct focus on non-violent influence, with the introduction of Non-Kinetic Effect Teams (NKETs) on the company level. Also, instead of rotating British companies through the “rash of patrol bases and forward operating bases” that by then had been created, it was decided that the British Battlegroups and companies would be assigned to a specific location where they would stay for the entire

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162 Ibid., 83.

163 Ibid., 83.

164 Sergio Catignani, “Coping with Knowledge: Organizational Learning in the British Army?,” *Journal of Strategic Studies* 37, no. 1 (2014), 47.

165 Cowell, “Training For OMLT Team on OP HERRICK 6,” 84.

166 Ibid., 83.

167 Farrell, *Unwinnable: Britain's War in Afghanistan, 2001–2014*, 209.

duration of the tour.¹⁶⁸ Although this was already attempted by earlier OMLT rotations, this now became common practice for the ground-holding battalions. Several FOB locations, deemed too far from the local population to be effective, were relocated, such as FOB Arnhem in the Gereshk district, which was relocated into the green zone and renamed FOB Gibraltar by its first occupants, a Royal Marines detachment.¹⁶⁹

The pinnacle of HERRICK 7 was the retaking of the Helmand town of Musa Qala. During HERRICK 4, the town of Musa Qala had been occupied by British force elements who were part of the 3 PARA Battlegroup.¹⁷⁰ However, as the British forces became stretched during the summer of 2006, an initiative from Musa Qala's elders to take security in their own hands—renouncing both Taliban and British influence—under the condition of a British (and Taliban) withdrawal from the city was eagerly accepted by Butler and Tootal. However, the status of Musa Qala as a *civitas libera* would not last, as the Taliban were quick to reestablish predominance over this important crossroads in the drug trade. Ever since, Musa Qala had been a thorn in the British side as it symbolised the British military impotency in Helmand. Although recapturing Musa Qala was not a HERRICK 7 objective *a priori*, a defecting Taliban medium-level commander by the name of Mullah Salaam provided the impetus to recapture Musa Qala.¹⁷¹

In the weeks preceding the recapture, British forces began to apply pressure on Taliban forces in and near Musa Qala. Patrols were operating progressively closer to the town, and Mackay assembled more than 2,000 troops for the final assault which began on 7 December 2007. Following Mackay's intent regarding using as little violence as possible, the British tightened the vice around Musa Qala by concentrating around the town, however keeping the northern approach open to allow enemy forces to withdraw, rather than inciting them to put up a fight to the death in an urbanised environment. Mackay's intent was to "begin wearing the Taliban down, dislocate them, punch them hard when they ventured out, lower their morale and begin to separate out the tier one—the key leaders and more ideologically driven—and the tier two—the guns for hire, not in for the long haul."¹⁷² To further pressure

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¹⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 211.

¹⁶⁹ Interview CO HTF 2 28/10/2020

¹⁷⁰ Importantly, these force elements did not only included members from the Parachute Regiment, but also from subordinated units, including the Royal Irish and Danish infantrymen. Source: Tootal, *Danger Close: The True Story of Helmand from the Leader of 3 Para*.

¹⁷¹ For a more detailed account of the recapture of Musa Qala, see: Stephen Grey, *Operation Snakebite: The Explosive True Story of an Afghan Desert Siege* (Penguin UK, 2010).

¹⁷² P. Hurst and J. Starkey, "The Taking of Musa Qala," *The Scotsman*, 17/12/2007, see: <https://web.archive.org/web/20110605001254/http://thescotsman.scotsman.com/afghanistan/The-taking-of-Musa-Qala.3595363.jp>, accessed 20/07/2021.

the Taliban, Task Force Helmand had ISAF's reserve battalion, the Theatre Task Force 'Task Force Fury,' at its disposal. This battalion of airborne US soldiers was nearing the end of its tour and had a reputation of professional hard-hitting soldiers after eleven months of fighting, predominantly in Helmand Province.¹⁷³ TF Fury provided Mackay thus with the extra firepower and an element of surprise—TF Fury could be inserted in its entirety by helicopter—in order to break the Taliban's will to stand and fight for Musa Qala.

In line with his views on the standing of the ANA, Mackay broke with tradition, as he included the ANA Brigade's leadership in the planning process to retake Musa Qala at the earliest opportunity. Previously, the ANA were considered a liability to operational security, and as such was informed as late as possible, if at all. Mackay decided to trade any OPSEC (Operational Security) concerns with achieving the integration between the ISAF and the Afghan forces. The one bit of information that Mackay kept from the ANA was the precise landing point and approach that Task Force Fury's planned airborne assault took, but the ANA still knew that an airborne assault would be integral to the overall plan.¹⁷⁴ Although the vast bulk of planning was conducted by the British, and the planning process was fairly well advanced by the time the ANA was included, the inclusion of the ANA was considered relevant, and pertinent, and it resulted in considered concessions to ANA opinion.¹⁷⁵ Besides further integrating the Afghan forces, and by proxy the 2 YORKS OMLT as well, Mackay had put great effort into the manner and method of the liberation of Musa Qala. While the term 'Afghanisation' was used prior, Mackay understood the clumsiness of the term but also acknowledged the need for the ANA to be integrated more fully, to be provided with more authority and to shoulder more responsibility.¹⁷⁶ So, lacking a better term, an 'Afghan Focus' was implemented, aiming to increase the level of Afghan ownership of the security situation of Helmand, but also breaking with the predisposition that working with the ANA was an OMLT effort. Rather, supporting the ANSF would be something every British servicemember should feel responsible for.¹⁷⁷ For 2 YORKS, this meant that they would serve at the periphery of the operation to retake Musa Qala, as for all intents and purposes, the ANA was not considered capable to dislodge the Taliban from their fortified positions in Musa Qala.¹⁷⁸ However, after a joint and combined effort by mostly the American and British forces, the ANA were ordered to march into the centre of Musa Qala first, without a large ISAF presence,

173 Grey, *Operation Snakebite: The Explosive True Story of an Afghan Desert Siege*, 16. Interview UK CO HTF 2 28/10/2020

174 Ibid.

175 James Bryden, "Operational Mentoring During HERRICK 7," *British Army Review* 4.1 (2015): 80.

176 MacKay, "Counterinsurgency in Helmand; Task Force Operational Design," 2.

177 Ibid., 2–3; Bryden, "Operational Mentoring During HERRICK 7," 76.

178 Bryden, "Operational Mentoring During HERRICK 7," 78.

in order to claim the reoccupation of the town as an Afghan victory and presenting it as such in the national and international media.¹⁷⁹

This plan was executed from 6 December onwards, with TF Fury airlifted to the north of Musa Qala and British and Afghan forces pushing in from other directions. Although the Taliban put up some initial resistance, the house-to-house fighting that was feared would be necessary to retake the town was avoided as the Taliban withdrew or blended into the local population. After ISAF shaped the environment by coercing or eliminating most Taliban fighters from the battlefield, the ANA was indeed able to occupy Musa Qala, presenting the Afghan government and ISAF with a high-profile media opportunity to exploit.

In the aftermath of the retaking of Musa Qala, it was decided that the ANA would stay responsible for the security in the Musa Qala area, and do so without a large ISAF presence to directly support them. As such, the Musa Qala area became the first Afghan-held area of operations in Helmand. To the OMLT—who would stay with the ANA Battalion—the establishment of this area of operations indicated a transition of ‘security lead’ to the ANA, and as such a major step forward, and in line with earlier progress regarding the ANA’s closer involvement during the planning phase and greater independency regarding the execution of operations.

Many positives were indeed observed regarding the ANA as an increasingly professional force. The 2 YORKS OMLT conducted live firing close-quarter drills with the ANA, up to battalion level. Although it was noticed that these exercises would not constitute what the SASC¹⁸⁰ would call ‘safe,’ huge advantages in a very short time were observed.¹⁸¹ However, the duality of the ANA became adamant as morale sunk after a few days in the Helmand desert. One officer recalled that the “ANA began acting up. They were scared, ill-disciplined and unused to surviving in the desert. The enemy began to take an interest, 107 mm rockets landing around the leaguer—the ANA jumping into our shell scrapes as they hadn’t bothered to dig their own, despite our best efforts to mentor them. Our real problems started when the ANA bread ran out. This sounds trivial to professional soldiers—but a large stretch from being able to operate independently.”

After the retaking of Musa Qala, the ANA and OMLT was again involved in a plethora of smaller and larger operations, mostly from the patrol bases and FOBs that had been constructed during the past two years. Although the Musa Qala district would remain rather calm for the

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179 Farrell, *Unwinnable: Britain's War in Afghanistan, 2001–2014*, 221.

180 Small Arms School Corps.

181 “2nd Battalion The Yorkshire Regiment,” *The Yorkshire Regiment Journal* (2007): 48.

duration of the deployment, the Sangin and Upper Garesh Valley remained a hotly contested area.¹⁸²

3.2.5 OMLT HERRICK 8: 1st Battalion The Royal Irish Regiment

Herrick 8 saw the return of 16 Air Assault brigade as the leading formation, by now under the leadership of Brigadier Carleton-Smith, who would become the Chief of the General Staff (CGS) of the British Army a decade later. Subordinated to his command to mentor the ANA was the 1st Battalion, Royal Irish Regiment (1 R IRISH) under the command of Lt. Col. Edmund Freely. The battalion already had first-hand experience in Helmand province, as three of its platoons had been attached to 3 PARA during HERRICK IV.¹⁸³ The ground-holding battlegroups were formed around two of the PARA battalions (2 PARA and 3 PARA¹⁸⁴), and the 2nd and 5th Battalion The Royal Regiment of Scotland.¹⁸⁵ The OMLT Battlegroup was provided by 16 AAB's CO with the missions statement to “train, mentor and strike in support of the ANA 3/205 Brigade ANA, both provincially and regionally, in order to enable the continued progress towards 3/205 Brigade becoming a self-sufficient sustainable and operationally proven all arms Brigade.”¹⁸⁶ The OMLT reorganised itself into four mentor teams: each to be attached to an ANA kandak. As such, the CO of a mentor team (Major) would command three to four subteams (who would be attached to the ANA companies).¹⁸⁷ As a mentor team relied heavily on the officers and NCOs, the surplus private soldiers were reorganised into an additional ground-holding company destined for the Sangin area.¹⁸⁸ Again, this decision left the OMLT CO bereft of organic manoeuvre capacity.

In preparation, 1 R IRISH had to complete the by-now standard pre-deployment package for all 16 AAB Battlegroups. A long exercise in Kenya was part of the pre-deployment training (PDT), although little OMLT-specific training was conducted. However, the OMLT BG conducted a “limited amount of both Dari and Pashto training” in order to be better suited to interact with its future Afghan interlocutors.¹⁸⁹ The late addendum of a fifth kandak necessitated 1 R IRISH to hastily form up a fifth OMLT team. This team “had a large proportion of reinforcing

182 Interview UK Army officer 44, 25/11/2020.

183 For an in depth presentation of the 1 R IRISH regiment during HERRICK 4, see: Bishop, *3 Para: Afghanistan, Summer 2006*; Tootal, *Danger Close: The True Story of Helmand from the Leader of 3 Para*.

184 Formally, 3 PARA was under command of RC/S, but de facto was supporting HTF operations during its deployment.

185 British Army, Operation Herrick Campaign Study, Warminster: Directorate Land Warfare (2015).

186 Cartwright, “Operational Mentor and Liaison Team Op HERRICK 8,” *British Army Review* 146 (2009).

187 Email Correspondence UK Army officer 38, 12/08/2020.

188 Ibid.

189 Ibid., email correspondence with UK CO OMLT 34, 05/11/2020.

personal from other [...] units,” including territorial army personnel.¹⁹⁰ As this last team was put together in an ad-hoc fashion, its personnel was as involved in PDT as possible, ranging from a full six months to none whatsoever. One OMLT member commented that “my preparation for my deployment on Herrick 8 was non-existent. I was commissioned from the ranks and became a Captain on the 2nd of April and deployed to Afghanistan on the 3rd. I was attached to the Royal Irish Regiment and I had had no contact with them before my tour. Fortunately, I had spent several years on operations, my last in Iraq, training Iraqi police in Basra.”¹⁹¹ Another officer commented that the “training received was not particularly well-tailored to the OMLT role.”¹⁹² The challenges of the late integration of an additional team were recognised by the CO, as the reminisced that the “taking on of mixed background augmentees very late on [caused a challenge] in FORGEN and FORPREP¹⁹³ cycles.”¹⁹⁴ Although Freely expressed himself rather politically, some of his subordinates were more outspoken on the selection of Territorial Army soldiers and other late augmentees. Cartwright reflected that “[mentoring] requires good quality soldiers to perform this task and the will to make it happen. Soldiers need to be chosen carefully and brought together into teams at least a year before deployment (or six months having done the required individual skills training).¹⁹⁵ One interviewee considered his team to be “a mismatch of everyone who was spare, wastes and strays in one basket.”¹⁹⁶

Freely considered the integration between the OMLT and its mentees to be of paramount importance. Therefore, Freely advocated bringing over the ANA Brigade’s CO, Brigadier General Mohayedin over to the UK together with his subordinate officers to “win and retain their trust and confidence from the earliest.”¹⁹⁷ Freely had assessed that “over a six-month tour, he would not have the luxury of using the first two months to win [Mohayedin’s] trust, so I made the strong case to invest in the relationship already in PDT.”¹⁹⁸ As a result, the OMLT BG were a known entity that could pick up from the established introductions in

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190 Email correspondence with UK Army officer 45, 15/10/2020; Cartwright, “Operational Mentor and Liaison Team Op HERRICK 8”; Farrell, *Unwinnable: Britain’s War in Afghanistan, 2001–2014*, 234.

191 Email correspondence with UK Army officer 45, 15/10/2020.

192 Email correspondence Army officer 38 12/08/2020.

193 Force Generation and Force Preparation.

194 Email correspondence with UK CO OMLT 34, 05/11/2020.

195 Cartwright, “Operational Mentor and Liaison Team Op HERRICK 8,” 36.

196 Interview UK Army officer 52 11/11/2020.

197 Email correspondence with UK CO OMLT 34, 05/11/2020.

198 Ibid.

PDT. Or, as Freely put it, he had “studied and then exploited the Afghan hospitality code of *Pashtunwali*.”¹⁹⁹

During the HERRICK 8 rotation, the OMLT performed operations in support of the Helmand scheme of manoeuvre, mostly following 16 AAB’s lead. These operations included the large-scale operation OQAB STERGA, which aim was to clear the Helmand River valley of Taliban presence between Garesh and Sangin. Also, the British Task Force Helmand conducted an operation—the much-maligned operation OQAB TSUKA—which aimed to insert a new turbine into the well-known Kajaki Dam power station. During this operation, the ANA and OMLT supported 3 PARA Battlegroup from FOB Zeebrugge near Kajaki in this prestige operation for 16 AAB.²⁰⁰ Besides these large taskforce-led operations, the OMLT supported routine security and liaison patrols, in which small OMLT teams of four to six service members would accompany ANA platoon-sized patrols to engage the local populace and gather intelligence. As the British forces were scattered over a large amount of FOBs and PBs in Helmand, often small groups of six to eight OMLT members supported the ANA contingent present in one of those bases.²⁰¹

Despite Freely’s attempts to build rapport from an early moment, the cooperation between the ANA and the HERRICK 8 OMLT was troubled. Although the Afghan soldiers were praised for their short decision-action cycle, agility and resistance to hardship by their British mentors, one officer stated that the ANA were “lazy and lacked any get-up and go. We made a rod for our own back by allowing them to get away with it, to be honest, we should have stepped back a little more and let them take the lead instead of taking on all of the planning of operations.”²⁰² Another officer commented that “they [the ANA] struggled to plan, integrate support capabilities and ensure sustainment—and tended to be impulsive. I often wonder whether the fact that we—the OMLT—did all this for them meant that they didn’t feel they should worry too much. Their informal structure meant that they suffered from poor discipline—which often translated into sub-standard conduct in the field, and high absentee rates.”²⁰³ Additionally, the ANA leadership was “mercurial at all levels. At times, the ANA were compliant, appreciative and even reliable, while at other times the ANA were erratic, extreme, brutal and dangerous, causing fractures in the relationship.”²⁰⁴

199 Richard Doherty, *Helmand Mission: With the Royal Irish Battlegroup in Afghanistan 2008* (Casemate Publishers, 2010). Chapter 2 eBook.

200 Farrell, *Unwinnable: Britain’s War in Afghanistan, 2001–2014*, 239–44.

201 See: “Spoken From The Front: Real Voices From the Battlefields of Afghanistan,” Operation Herrick 8: <https://erenow.net/www/spoken-from-the-front/6.php>, accessed 31/01/2023.

202 Email correspondence with UK Army officer 45, 15/10/2020.

203 Email correspondence Army officer 38 12/08/2020.

204 Email correspondence with UK CO OMLT 34, 05/11/2020.

As the OMLT struggled with ill-motivated and skills-deprived Afghan troops, the integration of the ANA into 16 AAB's scheme of manoeuvre was also suboptimal. To some, it seemed that the mentoring/partnering mission was a "sideshow to operations by the UK Brigade—which was often reflected in its resourcing."²⁰⁵ Freely described it as "in effect we had two chains of command to satisfy. The first was the UK 16 Air Asslt Bde chain which wished to harness and synchronise the operational output capability of the ANA Bde to reinforce and support the UK Bde scheme of manoeuvre. Separate to this—and completely unrelated—was the US C-STCA (Support & Training Command AFG) capability development and Capacity Building a chain of command that set objectives for the training and development of the ANA."²⁰⁶ Balancing the two missions was a challenge."²⁰⁷ In other words, Freely assessed that the Capacity Building of the Afghan National Army did not hold pre-eminence within the Task Force Helmand, rather utilising the ANA as a form of force multiplier for the HTF's own scheme of manoeuvre.²⁰⁸ Indeed, in Farrell's reconstruction of 16 AAB's tour in Helmand, HTF was described as under pressure from the American ISAF commander General McNeill to forcefully oust the Taliban from parts of Helmand, rather than focus on the amelioration of the Afghan National Army.²⁰⁹ An intervention by American Marines in Helmand was perceived as embarrassing for the British elite light infantry regiment, and subsequently, the HTF made a serious effort not to be shown up by the US Marines again.²¹⁰

As the HTF focused on kinetic operations, the dispersed OMLT largely remained confined to the FOBs and patrol bases and its immediate surroundings. However, the OMLTs were not able to lift the ANA troops to a higher level of soldiering, much to the frustration of several of the interviewees. Remarkably, soldiers involved in the HERRICK 8 rotation both reported ANA progress, whilst simultaneously making highly disparaging remarks on ANA professionalism. In his aide-memoire to the Task Force, Brigadier Carleton-Smith praised the raising level of confidence and ability of the ANA and lauded the success of ANA training.²¹¹ Several interviewees also attested that the ANA improved during the deployment²¹²; however, most sources gave made remarks on ANA military performances, which included accusations



²⁰⁵ Email correspondence Army officer 38 12/08/2020.

²⁰⁶ T. A. Forrest, "OMLT – The Complexities of the Chains of Command," *Infantryman*, 108–9.

²⁰⁷ Email correspondence with UK CO OMLT 34, 05/11/2020.

²⁰⁸ For a full understanding of the complexities of the command and control structure surrounding the OMLT Battlegroup, see:

Forrest, "OMLT – The Complexities of the Chains of Command."

²⁰⁹ Farrell, *Unwinnable: Britain's War in Afghanistan, 2001–2014*, 236.

²¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 237.

²¹¹ M. A. P. Carleton-Smith, "Operation Herrick 8 Operational Guide," Chapter 7.

²¹² Cartwright, "Operational Mentor and Liaison Team Op HERRICK 8"; Email correspondence with UK CO OMLT 34, 05/11/2020.

Forrest, "OMLT – The Complexities of the Chains of Command," 110.

of murder,²¹³ laziness, inept leadership and lack of initiative.²¹⁴ Moreover, although some effort was made to school the OMLT members on basic Dari and Pashtu, the OMLT was still heavily reliant on local translators. This interface between the OMLT and its interlocutors is absolutely vital in effective mentoring. In his article on the deployment, James Cartwright both stated the importance of local interpreters, as well as the indifference with which they were employed:

The arrangements with interpreters on Op Herrick 8 were weak. Interpreters are as important as the mentors' tongues; they're vital. Interpreters were kept in wooden sheds just outside the British Camp and often farmed out to British mentors seemingly at random. Continuity between mentors and interpreters must be improved, and training needs to be given to the interpreters in several military matters. A good interpreter is more than the mentor's voice, he is a moral and a cultural guide, a companion, a go-between, an acquirer of goods, an extra pair of eyes on patrol, (potentially) another soldier, and a friend. I would sooner have a good interpreter than a single member of force protection.²¹⁵

In November 2008, 1 R IRISH handed the OMLT tasks over to its successors, the 1st Battalion The Rifles Regiment (1 RIFLES). During the latter phases of the HERRICK 8 deployment, Freely recalled making an effort to pave the way for The Rifles, as he "viewed [the] HOTO as an influence operation. I sought to convince the ANA leadership that they were going to get a much better service from (1 RIFLES commanding officer) Joe Cavanagh and the Rifles than us. I also ensured that my team supported Joe's preparations, recces and training to the fullest extent and we ensured that OMLT AOR and BG assessreps and situational awareness were shared for the months preceding deployment so that their Comd team could be completely read into the local atmospherics and relationship dynamics."²¹⁶

3.2.6 OMLT HERRICK 9: 1st Battalion The Rifles Regiment

The Rifles Regiment was only formed in 2007 through the amalgamation of several smaller regiments within the British Army as a result of a 2004 Army reorganisation. The 2008 OMLT assignment was thus the first major deployment for a Rifles regiment battalion, with the 1st Battalion (1 RIFLES) assigned for the OMLT task. In August the battalion had moved from the north of England to its new permanent barracks in Chepstow.

213 Email correspondence with UK CO OMLT 34, 05/11/2020; Doug Beattie and Philip Gomm, *Task Force Helmand: A Soldier's Story of Life, Death and Combat on the Afghan Front Line* (Pocket Books, 2009), 249.

214 Cartwright, "Operational Mentor and Liaison Team Op HERRICK 8." Email correspondence UK Army officer 45, 15/10/2020; Email correspondence Army officer 38 12/08/2020.

215 Cartwright, "Operational Mentor and Liaison Team Op HERRICK 8," 35.

216 Email correspondence UK CO OMLT 34, 04/11/2020.

Under another reorganisation, 1 RIFLES had been attached to 3 Commando Brigade as a light role infantry battalion, which made 3 Cdo Brigade a square brigade. In preparation for HERRICK 9, 1 RIFLES attended a field training exercise in Belize for seven weeks in order to conduct conventional light role training as a battlegroup with associated commando engineers and gunners. The aim of the exercise was to train and practice warfighting in a hostile and alien environment, including tracking, medical trauma training, demolitions and riverine operations.²¹⁷ On its return to the UK, 1 RIFLES was formally given the role as OMLT for HERRICK 9.²¹⁸ As a result, the latter part of 2008 was mostly spent with getting soldiers on individual courses to be qualified on various vehicles and equipment to become trained instructors in preparation for the upcoming Afghanistan OMLT deployment.²¹⁹

As 1 RIFLES had been given the OMLT task, the pre-deployment training was rerouted to a more specific OMLT track. In camp, the battalion conducted Pashtu language training for those with aptitude, cultural awareness briefings and training for all roles: specific satcom courses, week-long team medics courses for all OMLT members, role-specific serials such as how to conduct a Shura meeting, how to set up landing sites for CASEVAC, and constant counter-IED drills.²²⁰

During collective training with the rest of 3 Cdo Brigade, the OMLT appointees conducted role-specific OMLT training focusing on the eight-man OMLT team, rather than the company and battalion manoeuvre and attacks that the Commando manoeuvre units were conducting on the live firing areas.²²¹

Like its predecessors, 1 RIFLES hosted twelve senior officers from the ANA Brigade to whom they would be attached. The Afghan officers were invited to see the British exercise and were hosted for a formal dinner in the battalion's barracks, and were also "hosted on a goodwill tour of England's cultural delights."²²²

The Commando Brigade units that were to be deployed (42 and 45 Commandos) had each already completed one tour in Afghan since, so as the new entrant to the brigade, and as a newly formed unit, 1 RIFLES was given the OMLT task. The Brigade Commander thus passed on the opportunity to reassign 45 Commando as the OMLT, considering the experience of that unit as an OMLT during HERRICK 5. Nonetheless, the officers and NCOs of 1 RIFLES were

217 The Rifles Regiment, *The Chronicle* (2008), 19.

218 Interview UK OMLT mentor 49, 27/10/2020.

219 Interview UK OMLT mentor 49, 27/10/2020.

220 The Rifles Regiment, *The Chronicle* (2008), 21.

221 Interview UK OMLT mentor 49, 27/10/2020.

222 Interview UK OMLT mentor 49, 27/10/2020; The Rifles Regiment, *The Chronicle* (2008) 22.

quite content with their assignment, notwithstanding lesser status of the OMLT within the British Army.²²³ Likewise, the surplus private soldiers were reassigned to different tasks. One platoon was sent to Kabul to protect the main UK base, and another went to Camp Bastion to provide Force Protection.²²⁴

With the organisation structure developing over the summer of 2008, 1 RIFLES outfitted four OMLT teams. Like its predecessors, the number of teams was increased by one as the battalion was initially under the assumption that it would only mentor three kandaks and the Brigade HQ. The 4th ANA kandak—mirroring earlier rotations—would be drawn from various service members who were banded together and were subsequently incorporated into the unit as “E Company.”²²⁵

Moreover, the OMLT battlegroup made an effort to further specialise the ANA by augmenting the OMLT HQ with specific individuals from other units to deliver logistics, equipment support, signals, and fires expertise in order to mentor the Brigade HQ. These augmentees were known as “team zero.”²²⁶ Some officers were part of team zero as well as part of a regular kandak OMLT, leading to conflicts of interest when the kandak was deployed on operations, as reporting to two different echelons is quite an impossible task.

On operations, the 1 RIFLES rotation suffered a total of eight KIA, which is indicative of the intensity of the COIN operation in Helmand during HERRICK 9.²²⁷ As per normal, the OMLT was scattered around the province, with teams attached to ANA subunits in Musa Qaleh, Sangin, Hereshk, Nad Ali and Garmsir districts. Despite the casualties, the 1 RIFLES regiment generally reported favourable on the ANA capacity, especially praising the Afghan’s loyalty, bravery, and ability to quickly manoeuvre and fix the Taliban with direct fire.²²⁸ The subsequent allocation of indirect fire and airpower was outside of the ANA company and thus British liaisons were needed to cover this capability.²²⁹ The necessity of a liaison presence, however, was also described by members of 1 RIFLES’ A-coy, who in the regimental gazette elaborated on the painful process of “herding” the ANA towards professional military behaviour.²³⁰ One officer stated that “though the ANA soldiers are on the whole brave men

223 C. E. D. Grist, “Command, Control, Conversation and Cultural Understanding: C4 Operational Mentoring Liaison Team (OMLT) Style,” *Infantryman* (2009), 87.

224 Regimental Journal the Rifles Regiment, 26–27; Interview UK OMLT mentor 49, 27/10/2020.

225 Ibid, 21.

226 Interview UK OMLT mentor 49, 27/10/2020.

227 Regimental Journal the Rifles Regiment, 24.

228 D. Holloway, “On Loan with the OMLT,” *The Bugle Spring* (2009), 31.

229 M. Endersby, *The Bugle* (Spring), 32.

230 A. Coy, Musa Qaleh to Shorbal to Nad-e’ Ali, “Wheat Convoy to Sangin,” 25.

they, as an Army, lack the sophistication to deconflict with ISAF or bring inorganic firepower to bear.”²³¹ The small size of the OMLT teams meant that on the remote outposts, the OMLT had little guidance from the OMLT Battlegroup, and was mostly in direct contact with the nearest British regular company. As the smaller outposts were only manned by the OMLT and the ANA, the danger of being overrun by the Taliban was present, although this never materialised during the entirety of operation HERRICK. Thus, being responsible for one’s own security, scheme of manoeuvre and mentoring efforts, the individual experiences of each team greatly differed. Still, the perceived responsibility and flexibility needed to perform as an OMLT cause one officer to reflect on the OMLT skill set as follows:

A Mentor is twice the soldier; fully able mentally and physically to conduct warfighting operations, and have the maturity, resolute professionalism, courageous restraint, selflessness, perseverance, intelligence, guile, confidence and sense of humour required to be a successful mentor. Most of our patrols conducted, at some point, full-scale air-land integrated operations but unsupported by ANA and with only eight teammates—fighting withdrawals, CASEVAC under fire, assaults, clearance patrols and advances. Working with indigenous forces does not mean you scale back your professionalism, it means you have to work even harder to stay safe, be effective, and take the fight to the enemy.

In my experience, only good soldiers made good mentors, and the best mentors were the best soldiers.²³²

3.2.7 OMLT HERRICK 10: 2nd Battalion The Mercian Regiment

The Mercian Regiment—like the Rifles—is another regiment in the British Army that was constructed after the British Army reforms in 2004, by merging three single-battalion regiments.²³³ As of 2021, the 2nd Battalion The Mercian Regiment (2 MERCS) also ceased to exist due to further amalgamations within the service. Mid 2008, however, whilst in the process of recuperating from a tour in Helmand during HERRICK 6 as a ground-holding battalion, the battalion was again called upon, this time to fulfil the OMLT role.²³⁴ The Task Force Helmand CO for HERRICK 10, Brigadier Radford, judged that due to their previous tour in Helmand, 2 MERCS have had important experience in dealing with the ANA, and therefore the best choice for the OMLT role. Its task would be to improve the ANA’s effectiveness through training and mentoring, as well as enable the efficient employment and integration of Afghan forces

²³¹ D. Holloway, *The Bugle* (Spring), 31.

²³² Interview UK OMLT mentor 49, 27/10/2020.

²³³ Jamie Barlow, “How 4000 Army Cuts Will Affect Regiment Linked to the Legendary Sherwood Foresters,” *The Nottingham Post*, 14 April 2021, <https://www.nottinghampost.com/news/how-4000-army-cuts-affect-5295504>.

²³⁴ Email correspondence UK CO BAG 19, 13/01/2021.

into a complex field of battle and thereby increase the brigade's effectiveness. 2 MERCS' commanding officer, Lt. Col. Banton, considered the latter to be the most important for this deployment.²³⁵

Notably, 2 MERCIAN was directed to provide three significant force elements besides the OMLT: one rifle company was detached to operate as the Brigade Reconnaissance force (directed from brigade HQ), with two rifle companies (A and B) were detached and allocated to be the ground-holding companies for a battlegroup formed around a light cavalry unit (the Light Dragoons). Lastly, a single infantry was assigned to operate as a convoy protection force for the logistic regiment.²³⁶

As a result, the OMLT had to be formed around the battalion HQ and support company, with individual augmentees making up the rest of the OMLT organisation. Thus, of the circa 450 personnel in the OMLT BG I, only 180 were originating from the Mercian Regiment, with the remainder made up of soldiers contributed by all the other units in the brigade. The gaps in the organisation were filled by a trawl across the army ultimately leading to reinforcements from forty-three different units.²³⁷ As a result, little time was available for team-building efforts, also least because "some units in the brigade selfishly retained as many people as they could, for as long as they could, to furnish their own sub-units first rather than spreading their assets."²³⁸ Moreover, many of those force-generated to the OMLT were not voluntary and were disgruntled that their own battalions had seemingly sent them away to work elsewhere.²³⁹ Also, several of the individual augmentees were not considered to be first-rate soldiers, but indeed the leftovers from other units from within the Brigade.

Eventually, some OMLT members would not report to the OMLT HQ until the first week in Helmand. Individual augmentees thus reviewed the pre-deployment training as "an accumulation of practices adapted/modified from conventional warfare into a few contained weekly packages. [Apart from] the addition of country/cultural specifics, there didn't seem to be any scenario building or training geared around working with the ANA/ANP."²⁴⁰ Although some individuals received language training, most commonly a ten-week survival course in Dari, some OMLT members had received an eighteen-month course in order to become

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235 Ibid.

236 Ibid.

237 S. Chaney, "OP HERRICK 10 Attached to the Light Dragoons / 2 Mercian Battle Group," *CHESHIRE (EARL OF CHESTER'S) YEOMANRY ASSOCIATION NEWSLETTER*, 18–19; Email correspondence Banton.

238 Email correspondence UK CO BAG 19, 13/01/2021.

239 Ibid.

240 Interview UK OMLT mentor 21, 17/01/2021.

proficient in the Afghan language.²⁴¹ However, the OMLT, notwithstanding the nature of their profession in Afghanistan, did not have any priority in claiming the language courses over other British units.²⁴²

Upon arrival in Afghanistan, the 2 MERCS OMLT did receive a four-day in-theatre training package in Camp Tombstone, providing some remedial instruction on the ANA organisation, personal skills needed and specific medical training. Additional weapons training was also included, as was a counter-IED lane. Additionally, the RSOI (Reception, Staging, Onward Movement and Integration) package as provided by 1 RIFLES was considered excellent and comprehensive.²⁴³

Operationally, the OMLTs were deployed across Helmand and embedded with the ANA battalions. The OMLTs enabled multiple battalion-sized operations and ANA brigade-level operations. Operations worth mentioning include Operation ZAFAR, which aimed to clear the Taliban from several villages near Lashkar Gah and Operation Panchai Palang in June 2009.²⁴⁴ The latter involved Afghan, British and American troops and aimed the removal of Taliban forces from an area north of Lashkar Gah, ahead of the presidential elections of that year.²⁴⁵ From ANA patrol bases across Helmand, the OMLT deployed for myriad local area patrols. These local patrols were part of the routine, which further included the manning of camp security and infrequent informal training.²⁴⁶ Direct command and control proved to be a daunting task, as the Mercian OMLT was spread out to more than twenty locations within Helmand province.²⁴⁷

As a result of General McChrystal's directive, the British forces very much aimed to increase the level of partnering, which culminated in battalion-sized operations with either the Afghans—with support of the OMLT—supporting the British Battlegroup or vice-versa.²⁴⁸ As a number of Mercians were veterans of the HERRICK 6 campaign, it was noted that during the latter stages of HERRICK 10 a somewhat coherent strategy was developed in response to a “now desperate need to get out of an unwinnable war.”²⁴⁹ According to the CO, the HERRICK

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241 Interview UK OMLT mentor 22, 17/02/2021.

242 Ibid.

243 Weblog Lieutenant Colonel Simon Banton, part 1, 06/04/2009.

244 Jeffrey A. Dressler, “Securing Helmand,” *Institute for the Study of War, Afghanistan Report 2* (2009), 34–38.

245 Mercians in Afghanistan timeline, see: “Mercians in Afghanistan Timeline,” *News BBC*, 20 October 2009, http://news.bbc.co.uk/local/herfordandworcester/hi/people_and_places/history/newsid_8316000/8316110.stm.

246 Interview UK OMLT mentor 21, 17/01/2021.

247 Weblog Lieutenant Colonel Simon Banton, part 1, 06/04/2009.

248 Interview UK OMLT mentor 22, 17/02/2021.

249 Email correspondence UK CO BAG 19, 13/01/2021.

6 strategy had been an absolute shambles, and it was evident that “the UK Army had lost the plot—such was the cowboy nature of our [OMLT] operations. Standards were allowed to slip, we allowed soldiers to wear rag-tag uniforms, long hair and stupid beards.”²⁵⁰ Banton assessed that even ANA Brigadier General Muhayadin—already working with his 7th British OMLT mentor—was clear that we had looked foolish and unprofessional during that phase.

Wrapping up its second deployment in two years, the 2 MERCS OMLT prepared to hand over to 2 YORKS as the command of the HTF was transferred from 19 Light Brigade to 11 Light Brigade on 10 October 2009.

3.2.8 Operation ENTIRETY

Banton’s observation that the British campaign in Helmand province was not going well was shared by senior British policy makers and military staff. The Chief of the General Staff (CGS) of the British Army, General David Richards, initiated a “comprehensive institutional change programme” to place the Army on a “war footing,” dubbed Operation ENTIRETY, in order to counter the lack of progress in Helmand counterinsurgency campaign.²⁵¹ The stated objective of Operation Entirety was to meet the CGS intent to ensure that Land Forces are resourced, structured and prepared—conceptually, morally and physically—for success in Afghanistan and then other subsequent hybrid operations.”²⁵² Therefore, Operation ENTIRETY revolved around the tenet to change the way that the British Army’s units were prepared for the War in Afghanistan, rebalancing the pre-deployment training and addressing the issues the Army had with institutionalising the lessons learned during the HERRICK campaign so far. In effect, the British Army in particular repositioned Operation HERRICK from a temporary and evanescent operation to its main effort. Indeed, the counterinsurgency efforts were a far cry from mechanised formations that were deemed necessary to see off Russian invading forces in a Cold War-era setting, and thus Operation ENTIRETY was set up as a temporary effort, which would be both reversible and rather short-term (one to five years) if geopolitical events so demanded.²⁵³ Inspired by the US Army’s Training and Doctrine Command (TRADOC), ENTIRETY aimed to accommodate “force development, capability development, training, equipment, doctrine and lessons under one [...] organization.”²⁵⁴ The forthcoming section of Force Development and Training (FDT), commanded by three-star general Sir Paul Newton, set out to “deliver improvements in the preparation and execution of the Helmand

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250 Ibid.

251 British Army, “Operation Herrick Campaign Study,” Warminster: Directorate Land Warfare (2015), xxxv.

252 Army Briefing Note 32/09: “Operation ENTIRETY – The Execution of Campaign Footing,” dated 24/6/09.

253 British Army, “Operation Herrick Campaign Study,” Warminster: Directorate Land Warfare (2015), xxxvii.

254 Ibid., xxxix.

Campaign.”²⁵⁵ As Newton held an extensive mandate, the effects of ENTIRETY started to show in all aspects of the Helmand campaign, albeit that the majority of its improvements would show after the second iteration of 2 YORKS as an OMLT, with the entrée of 1 SCOTS as the first BAG.²⁵⁶

3.2.9 OMLT HERRICK 11: 2nd Battalion The Yorkshire Regiment II

HERRICK 11 saw the return of 2 YORKS in the OMLT role, as the battalion had been assigned to mentor the ANA as part of the newly formed 11 Light Brigade under Brigadier Cowen. Although Downey had been replaced by David Colthup as the CO of 2 YORKS by Lt. Col. David Colthup, the battalion’s previous deployment had been less than two years in the past, and as such plenty of residual experience was present within the unit.²⁵⁷ Nonetheless, Colthup had only recently been appointed CO of the battalion—he took command in September 2008, and Downey had been a strong advocate for the role of the ANA and the OMLT, believing in its strategic value of a well-developed Afghan National Army.²⁵⁸ Moreover, the two senior officers elaborately spoke on the merits and challenges of the OMLT job at hand. Although reassigning 2 YORKS as an OMLT Battlegroup made sense considering its past experience, 2 YORKS had been transferred to another brigade since its participation in HERRICK 7, and being part of the OMLT was still considered a less glamorous job than fighting the insurgency as a ground-holding battalion. One senior officer commented that considering the status of other battalion commanders in the brigade—being considered raising stars within the Army—and the late entry of 2 YORKS within 11 Light Brigade, the OMLT job was pushed down to 2 YORKS.²⁵⁹

The pre-deployment training, however, was starting to experience the positives of Operation ENTIRETY. Although the training was still focused on the ground-holding units, training facilities had improved—an ‘Afghan village’ had been constructed in Tethford, and the Afghan diaspora in Britain had been mobilised to act as local Helmandi’s, thus creating a true Afghan vibe whilst patrolling.²⁶⁰ The 400x400 m Afghan village was thus considered very useful for training, and “flooding the village with the Afghan diaspora added a sense

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255 Martijn van der Vorm, *The Crucible of War: Dutch and British Military Learning Processes in and beyond Southern Afghanistan* (Leiden University, 2023), 290.

256 Interview UK CO BAG 7, 15/12/2020.

257 Interview UK CO OMLT 26, 21/01/2021; I. Atkins, “OMLT Mentoring: A Platoon Commander’s Observations”; 3 Rifles BATTLE GROUP Battlenotes OP HERRICK 11, 173.

258 Interview UK OMLT mentor 43, 09/11/2020; Interview UK CO OMLT 26, 21/01/2021.

259 Ibid.

260 Interview UK OMLT mentor 44, 25/11/2020.

of realism and depth.”²⁶¹ Still, Colthup felt that his battalion was used to train up the other battalions in the brigade, rather than being the focus of attention in its future role.²⁶²

Mentoring-wise, OPTAG had attempted to lessen the dependence on local interpreters, as some private soldiers had been sent to a thirty-week Pashtu course. Although the concept of advanced language training for individual soldiers had been grasped by OPTAG, the simple fact that the ANA spoke Dari, not Pashtu, and the lack of military slang offered during the course made it a rather futile effort.²⁶³ Still, for the CO the language training stood out as a distinct improvement over earlier tours. Tellingly, Colthup considered the PDT to be an aggressive improvement, with OPTAG “getting it better each time. Improvement was continuous.”²⁶⁴ The OMLT predecessors of the 1 RIFLES battalion assisted 2 YORKS with its PDT, and although the knowledge was considered to be somewhat outdated it still was “really important” in preparing for the deployment.²⁶⁵

Within its area of operations, 2 YORKS had to mentor six ANA kandaks, to which the stripped-down companies of the battalion were attached to the three infantry kandaks of the ANA brigade. The C-coy, partnered with one of the battalions of the 2nd brigade of 205 corps, was also camped within the Helmand borders, in Lashkah Gah. The ANA CS and CSS kandaks were also overseen by the HQ of 2 YORKS, although it was staffed by the usual diverse mix of cap badges.²⁶⁶

Upon arrival, 2 YORKS received the customary RSOI package, which, depending on the unit, was considered “smooth and excellent” for the battalion HQ, and “not great” for some of the units located further from the main British base.²⁶⁷ After scattering over the myriad of patrol bases of Helmand, each OMLT team delivered its mentoring and liaising depending on the situation of that particular patch of land. One factor of influence, however, impacted the HERRICK 11 tour of 2 YORKS. On 30 August of 2009, General Stanley McChrystal had issued his initial assessment as COMISAF. In this document, he made explicit statements regarding ISAF’s approach and attitude towards the ANA. McChrystal stated that

[s]uccess will require trust-based, expanded partnering with the ANSF with assigned relationships at all echelons to improve effectiveness of the ANSF. Neither the ANA nor

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261 Interview UK CO OMLT 26, 21/01/2021.

262 Ibid.

263 The Yorkshire Regiment Journal, OMLT Amber 10, Battle Group North (3 RIFLES) Sangin, 32.

264 Interview UK CO OMLT 26, 21/01/2021.

265 Ibid.

266 The Yorkshire Regiment Journal, OMLT Amber 50, Combat Support, 37.

267 Interview UK OMLT mentor 43, 09/11/2020.

the ANP is sufficiently effective. ISAF must place far more emphasis on ANSF development in every aspect of daily operations. ISAF will integrate headquarters and enablers with ANA units to execute a full partnership, with the shared goal of working together to bring security to the Afghan people. ISAF units will physically co-locate with the ANSF, establish the same battle rhythm, and plan and execute operations together. This initiative will increase ANSF force quality and accelerate their ownership of Afghanistan's security.²⁶⁸

McCrystal's assessment was clear, and Colthup recognised that 2 YORKS was at the forefront of the concept of embedded partnering and that 2 YORKS would have to assist in developing the concept and facilitate the transition towards a fully mutual area of operations.²⁶⁹ At the HTF level, Brigadier Cowan had recognised the impact of McCrystal's directive. In an interview, he stated that "McCrystal [had] introduced his partnering directive, which in essence meant a twinning process with every [British] company, twinning with every unit. It was actually about living with them. The units would move in together. That is a fundamentally different prospect."²⁷⁰

The ground truth, however, was different. During the summer of 2009, Sangin had been the focal point of the Taliban, which had resulted in some very heavy fighting, killing dozens of British and Afghan soldiers. The arrival of 3 RIFLES as a ground-holding Battlegroup in Sangin brought in a fresh unit and new leadership, the area was still laced with improvised explosives, and the ANA had little incentive to patrol at all, let alone in a partnered fashion with the British. One officer commented that "I inherited a PB where the ANA did not want to venture more than three hundred meters from the gate. They did not proactively begin any work themselves and relied totally on ISAF to complete everything for them. The did not plan any patrols themselves. [...] The ANA were not competent enough to ensure there was security for the local national in and around Pylae."²⁷¹ This sentiment was echoed along the OMLT Battlegroup.²⁷² Moreover, the new directive complicated joint patrolling. While the combination of British OMLT members and ANA was a common occurrence, the introduction of a platoon or company of equal numbers added a third player on the field, which invariably reduced the OMLT from its de facto leadership role to that of a liaison, as the British and

268 S. A. McCrystal, *COMISAF'S INITIAL ASSESSMENT*, Headquarters ISAF (Kabul, 2009), 2–15.

269 The Yorkshire Regiment Journal, Battalion Headquarters, 27.

270 Interview UK CO TFU 17, 24/02/2021.

271 G. Fearnley, "What Are the Similarities and Differences between Coproate [sic] and Military Mentoring," 3 RIFLES Battle Notes, 180.

272 B. Obese-Jecty, "What Factors Need to be Addressed in Order to Ensure Embedded Partnering Success at the Command Level?," 3 RIFLES Battle Notes, 166; Interview UK OMLT mentor 44, 25/11/2020.

Afghan subunits were not equipped to interact with each other.²⁷³ Lastly, serious trust issues still existed between the British ground-holding battalions and the Afghan soldiers. One officer commented that “it has been seen on a number of occasions, from Battlegroup headquarters down to the individual soldier, that the ANA is still viewed with suspicion as to their level of competence by those outside of their immediate proximity.”²⁷⁴

The hasty implementation of the partnering directive led to a degree of scepticism and ambivalence amongst the OMLTs. And as the partnering directive found little fertile ground in Sangin, the British focus had shifted to central Helmand. British Major General Nick Carter, by now the CO of RC/S, had issued the order for Operation MOSHTARAK in January 2010. As it were, Operation MOSHTARAK was another direct result of McCrystal’s initial commander’s assessment as he considered it of paramount importance to reverse the insurgent’s momentum through military operations in order to buy time for the invariably slower improvements in governance.²⁷⁵ Operation MOSHTARAK (which roughly translates to ‘together’ in Dari), aimed to clear the Taliban from its strongholds in Marjah, central Helmand. However, Carter had to avoid alienating the local populace by using excessive amounts of force—the new policy of courageous restraint was being implemented—and the bloody losses of the British Army in the summer were not to be increased to avoid losing British popular support.²⁷⁶

Operation MOSHTARAK would be the largest operation in Afghanistan up to that point, and the US surge of troops meant that Carter had ample personnel and material to his disposition. Still, MOSHTARAK was meant to be an Afghan-led operation, in order to adhere to Karzai’s and McCrystal’s intent to show Afghan leadership and responsibility with regard to the counterinsurgency. To that end, seven kandaks from neighbouring provinces were moved to Helmand.²⁷⁷ This included a kandak from Uruzgan, which is also described in the chapter on the Netherlands’ OMLT. Considering the involvement of the ANA in the operation, the British OMLT naturally was highly involved in the execution. Still, the British and US had bypassed the ANA formations in both planning and executing the operation, citing the ANA’s lack of competence, relegating the operation to a US/UK get-together.²⁷⁸

273 N. Parkinson, “Embedded Partnering and the Role of the OMLT,” 3 RIFLES Battle Notes, 175–79; Interview UK OMLT mentor 44, 25/11/2020; Interview UK OMLT mentor 36, 20/12/2020.

274 B. Obese-Jecty, “What Factors Need to be Addressed in Order to Ensure Embedded Partnering Success at the Command Level?,” 3 RIFLES Battle Notes, 168.

275 Farrell, *Unwinnable: Britain’s War in Afghanistan, 2001–2014*, 287–88.

276 *Ibid.*, 304.

277 Interview UK CO OMLT 26, 21/01/2021.

278 Farrell, *Unwinnable: Britain’s War in Afghanistan, 2001–2014*, 322–24.

However, the surge of US troops in Helmand, in combination with the influx of ANA kandaks and the subsequent creation of a second ANA brigade in Helmand under command of the XO of the incumbent ANA formation, caused friction on all levels.²⁷⁹ In an attempt to adhere to McCrystal's partnering directive, it was attempted to co-locate the brigade HQs of the British and Afghan brigades, which was quickly abandoned as the ANA brigadier Sharin Shah simply left for his previous HQ.²⁸⁰ According to senior OMLT officers, the reshuffling of units and introduction of the US Marine Corps in the command and control mix led to "a real mess," just prior to Operation MOSHTARAK.²⁸¹ After several delays and reconfigurations, Operation MOSHTARAK succeeded in pushing the Taliban out of its strongholds in Marjah, central Helmand, although the ANA leadership in operation was in name only.²⁸² Thus, operation MOSHTARAK highlighted ISAF unwillingness and the ANA's inability to lead large-scale operations. Moreover, the partnering directive caused friction as the ANA and ISAF units were not prepared to jointly execute operations, exposing the ANA efforts as a reiteration of the 'Afghan face' concept of earlier rotations.

With the conclusion of operation MOSHTARAK, the OMLT's rotation of 2 YORKS also drew to an end. However, instead of transferring to yet another OMLT battlegroup, the 2 YORKS OMLT handed over to a 'Brigade Advisory Group,' or BAG. BAGs were the symptomatic nomenclature of the mentoring of Afghan forces following the partnering directive of McCrystal, intending to reinforce the policy change by changing the categorisation of the mentoring effort.²⁸³ The 1st battalion, the Royal Regiment of Scotland, would be the first BAG, whose tasks would include smoothing out the wrinkles caused by the abrupt change to partnering. During the latter phase of 2 YORKS' tenure, it was envisioned the binational interactions between the British and Afghan forces would be between the commanding officers of the ground-holding battalions and the ANA kandaks, making the OMLTs redundant.²⁸⁴ However, the difference between the OMLT and the BAG would be predominantly semantic, with 1 SCOTS taking over 2 YORKS' tasks mostly unaffected.

3.3 Subconclusion

As the British Army entered Helmand, its main focus had been on the lozenge between Lashkar Gah, Gereshk, and Camp Bastion. However, all units deployed over the summer of 2006 outside of Camp Bastion were exposed to the Taliban's efforts to drive the British

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279 Interview UK CO OMLT 26, 21/01/2021, Interview UK CO TFU 17, 24/02/2021.

280 Interview UK CO OMLT 26, 21/01/2021.

281 Ibid. .

282 Farrell, *Unwinnable: Britain's War in Afghanistan, 2001–2014*, 322.

283 Interview UK CO OMLT 26, 21/01/2021; interview UK OMLT mentor 44, 25/11/2020.

284 Interview UK CO TFU 17, 24/02/2021.

from its platoon house-based patrol bases, leading to a series of pitched battles and an overstretched battlegroup. As the Task Force Helmand was quick to incorporate the available manpower of the Afghan National Army in the defence of several districts in the province, the OMLT and ANA quickly found their place in the British-led campaign. However, the initial British OMLT had to find its way into the operational reality of a counterinsurgency campaign that resembled conventional warfighting rather than Malaya. Looking back at four years of mentoring the ANA, this conclusion will reflect on the staffing, preparation and execution of the British OMLT deployment, whilst highlighting the uniquely British aspects of mentoring during OPERATION HERRICK.

At the start of HERRICK 4, the initial OMLT, unsure about its task and purpose, had a false start. 7 RHA was ordered to fulfil a triptych of tasks, including mentoring the ANA. As it were, the OMLT was insufficiently equipped—both physically as well as psychologically—and its members were drawn from a host of different units as 7 RHA simply did not have enough personnel in its ranks to independently staff the OMLT. This affected the unity within the team, as the late entry of so many individuals prevented any pre-deployment cohesion building. Already in the second iteration, the OMLT adapted to be formed around a regular battalion (or commando in the case of the Royal Marines), with individual augmentees filling up any gaps within the order of battle (ORBAT) rather than providing the foundation of the ORBAT. This initial adaptation would endure, with each consecutive OMLT iteration being formed around an existing infantry battalion structure. This adaptation had an additional advantage as the OMLTs could use their own weapons and equipment. Although it was not always sufficient, it formed a foundation from which further equipment could be transferred to.

As the ANA's presence increased over the years, so did the demand for mentoring capacity. Early OMLT-assigned battalions were mostly able to marry up skeleton companies to Afghan kandaks, but as the number of kandaks surpassed the number of regular companies in a battalion more augmentees had to be taken in. Moreover, as a regular infantry battalion did not have the capability to technically mentor combat support and combat service support battalions, this capability also had to be drawn externally. As this chapter describes, the unity of effort of the OMLTs suffered from the intake of individual augmentees, as often the very late addition of service members of varied quality did little to ensure a strong communal basis and direction, often associated with military effectiveness. The inability to glue together before deployment was frequently cited as undesirable; however, it was not corrected during the described period.

Also, the first fatality of the campaign, suffered by the OMLT during HERRICK 4, laid bare a number of shortcomings regarding the staffing and equipment of the OMLT. The death of the officer—thoroughly investigated by the Army, although not without controversy—acted as a catalyst to quickly change the force structure of the OMLTs and also acted as an incentive

to better arm and equip the mentor teams. This process, however, was not yet completed for another year, with the OMLTs having to resort to augmenting its equipment through borrowing and scavenging.

The pre-deployment training of the British OMLTs showed a marked improvement during the seven rotations. Initially, the PDT, especially OMLT-specific, could be considered rudimentary at best. Combat training and marksmanship had been the bread and butter of the British infantry for decades and needed little remedial action. However, the British OMLTs did not participate in the NATO-led OMLT training exercises in Hohenfels or Bydgoszcz like the Netherlands or Belgium and had to resort to adjusting the existing HTF-PDT to a more OMLT-bespoke FTX. The initially flawed training—for instance, the OMLTs were stripped of their privates and put through a round-robin which was designed for fully staffed company-level subunits—were ironed out as the operation progressed. Another example is the mobilisation of the Afghan diaspora to act as local Afghans, a vast improvement to the initial attempts to practice mentoring using British Army musicians as extras. Also, the OMLTs started to take advantage of the short- and long-term language training in Dari and Pashto that became available during later rotations. Although this did not make local interpreters redundant, it did make rapport-building efforts easier as well as offering the mentors the possibility to convey simple tactical instructions during combat.

The necessity of building rapport is a quintessential aspect of capacity-building missions, especially during prolonged campaigns such as COIN. The research for this chapter indicated that knowledge of counterinsurgency was quite common amongst the senior officers of the OMLTs, who referred to classical counterinsurgency theorists as an influence on the execution of the deployment. Many British officers indeed made a serious effort to bond and build rapport with their Afghan counterparts, regularly citing T.E. Lawrence as an inspiration. Standing out as an example, the British invited senior Afghan officers over to the United Kingdom from HERRICK 8 onwards in order to build rapport with their Afghan interlocutors pre-deployment, overcoming some staunch institutional bureaucracy. A good relationship was considered paramount, as the British could not fall back on external sources of authority such as rank or experience. Rank especially was an important aspect; as mentioned previously in the chapter, the British OMLT mentored via a ‘one-up’ approach, resulting in a series of young lieutenant colonels having to mentor the brigadier general commanding the ANA Brigade. As the British officers were mostly aware that their tenure was—in the eye of the Afghans—a passing event, and that a certain amount of humility was fitting, few OMLT COs reported issues with the Afghan Brigade commander. Still, especially on the lower tactical levels, the age and lack of experience of younger officers caused some friction with the Afghan soldiers on remote outposts.

Operationally, the ANA/OMLT were quickly absorbed into the lower tactical level, frequently to man the increasing number of combat outposts and patrol bases. As manning an outpost could be tedious, on many smaller outposts the four to six man OMLTs had every volition to independently decide on their scheme of operations, which included basic training, manning the sangars as well as patrolling the immediate area of the posts, when and if the Afghan soldiers were willing to do so. During larger operations, Afghan soldiers were often flaunted as the ‘Afghan face of operations,’ though positioning the ANA as the leading entity of the counterinsurgency did not come to fruition. British military leadership was indeed reluctant to put the ANA at the forefront of the campaign, the ANA being subservient in the planning and execution of all major operations. The lack of ascendancy of the ANA was mirrored by the OMLTs, with many interviewees referring to the less glamorous nature of the mentorship tasks, as ground-holding battalions held prevalence, especially career-wise.

General Mackay, commanding HERRICK 7, was the first officer to attempt to increase the ANA’s significance in the campaign, as he endeavoured to frame the retaking of the Helmand town of Musa Qula as an Afghan-led victory. However, his bid to put the Afghans at the forefront of operations miscarried as the nascent Afghan forces were unable to coherently organise themselves in a credible formation capable of independently retaking a major Taliban stronghold. Indeed, the Afghan front only deceived the most casual of observers. Later, in both 2008 and 2009, top-down instructions by both McKiernan and McCrystal attempted to force the issue of Afghan parity; however, the Afghan Army remained plagued by individual and collective military haplessness, corruption and desertion, affecting the ANA to mature into an independent security institution as well frustrating all rotations of mentors.

During the four years of mentoring as an OMLT, the status of the mentoring tasks improved, together with the outfitting and pre-deployment training. Especially after the kick-off of Operation ENTIRETY during the penultimate OMLT rotation, the preparation of the OMLTs started to improve, and although ENTIRETY started to yield some effects during 2 YORKS second tenure, only the Brigade Advisory Groups, the first of which would succeed 2 YORKS and be staffed by 1 SCOTS, would fully benefit from this change of direction of the British Army. Still, the Afghan institutional inertia, in combination with a meandering campaign planning by a series of Brigadiers commanding the Task Force, prevented the OMLT and ANA to make progress that endured. The subsequent BAGs would remain to mentor the Afghan Army until October 2013, leaving ample opportunity for further research and academic scrutiny.