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

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Chapter 4

Chapter 4: The OMLTs of Task Force Uruzgan 2006–2010

4.1 Introduction

In the past decade, the Dutch armed forces have been increasingly deployed abroad to train, advise and assist foreign security forces, rather than to fight.[1] This policy change has its roots in the recent past. Fifteen years of counterinsurgency in Iraq and Afghanistan, in combination with decades of budget cuts, have led to a severe decrease in Dutch military capacity and capability.[2] The Dutch Army, in 2020, was unable to sustain a larger permanent deployment than company-sized. Moreover, it is politically unpalatable to get drawn into another 'endless war' or otherwise prolonged military commitment without the possibility to withdraw. The consequences of the alliance defection in 2010, when the Dutch opted not to extend their military presence in Uruzgan province, Afghanistan, are too fresh in Dutch parliamentary memory.[3] Still, as the Dutch foster their relationship with international organisations such as NATO and the EU, as well as their principal ally the United States, military participation is an important foreign policy exponent.[4] Following an international trend, the Dutch found a way to show its international commitment, whilst at the same time keeping the political, budgetary and physical risks to a minimum in security force assistance missions. Parliamentarians repeatedly stress the need for the Netherlands to take up on its international responsibility by participating in military deployments, although that international responsibility is most often not further specified.[5]

Contrary to expectations, the recent and extensive criticism on the effectiveness of SFA (or the lack thereof) has not reduced any Dutch enthusiasm in SFA. The Dutch have been involved in a plethora of SFA-type operations.[6] In fact, SFA-type operations form the majority of

1 Wiltenburg, "Security Force Assistance: Practised but not Substantiated."

2 M. Bentinck, "Why the Dutch Military Punches Below Its Weight," Carnegie Europe, (2018), https://carnegieeurope.eu/strategiceurope/75484.

3 Massie, "Why Democratic Allies Defect Prematurely: Canadian and Dutch Unilateral Pullouts from the War in Afghanistan."

4 Dutch Government White Paper, "Working Worldwide for the Security of the Netherlands: An Integrated International Security Strategy 2018–2022," https://www.government.nl/latest/news/2018/03/20/working-worldwide-for-the-security-of-the-netherlands-an-integrated-international-security-strategy-2018-2022; Interview A. Bosman, 04/06/2020; Interview H. Bruins Slot 12/06/2020.

5 Interview A. Bosman, 04/06/2020; H. Bruins Slot, 12/06/2020.

6 These include the Operational Mentoring and Liaison Team missions in Afghanistan (OMLT, 2006–2010), the Capacity Building Mission in Iraq (CBMI, 2014–current), the training missions as part of the European Battlegroup (EUBG), the African Contingency Operations Training and Assistance (ACOTA, 2004–current) and the special forces' 'Flintlock' exercises (2005–current), https://www.africom.mil/what-we-do/exercises/flintlock; Dutch Ministry of Defence, Overview of the Current Missions Abroad, https://english.defensie.nl/topics/missions-abroad/current-missions, accessed 07/11/2019.

international interventions the Netherlands are currently involved in. Historically, SFA has not been practiced on a large scale by the Dutch since the use of small cadres of Dutch forces to control the Dutch East-Indies colonies through a system of co-optation. On a small scale, Dutch forces have been involved in SFA-type operations in Papua-New Guinea, training a local militia in preparation to an Indonesian intervention (1961–1963) and Iraq, training Iraqi policemen (2003–2005.[7] Also, Dutch Special Forces have been involved in Military Assistance missions such as the yearly Flintlock exercises in Africa and elsewhere.[8] The renewed use of the military for training, advising and assisting foreign security forces is remarkable. However, in contrast with the political enthusiasm for SFA-type operations, little discourse on SFA is currently present in both the Dutch armed forces or politics.[9] This is noteworthy, as the Dutch experiences in SFA over the last decades have yielded much experience and knowledge on the topic, apparently without being institutionalised in the military or even a debate on the practice.[10] This chapter elaborates on the place of SFA in the Dutch strategic culture, the strategic value of SFA-type operations and the means that have been allocated to execute Dutch SFA-type operations in the past decade.

4.1.1 Dutch Strategic Culture

The Netherlands[11] is a geographically small state, but in possession of a strong economy and a well-developed diplomatic network. Surrounded by medium powers such as France, the United Kingdom and Germany, the Netherlands is embedded in a circle of larger friendly states, and as such perceive little to no territorial threat. In attaining political aims and defending national interest, the Netherlands generally prefer to use diplomacy and economic development as instruments, relative to the use of the military.[12]

Dutch strategic culture revolves around two tenets, an Atlanticist and a continental European approach. As Korteweg elaborates, both approaches are exponents of Western liberal thinking and constitute "different strains of liberal interventionism, however they accord a different

7 Thijs Brocades Zaalberg and Arthur ten Cate, "Missie in Al Muthanna," *De Nederlandse krijgsmacht in Irak* 2005 (2003); C. van Bruggen, *'Verget ons niet' Het Papoea Vrijwilligers Korps (1961–1963)* (Aspekt, 2011).

8 As Dutch SoF operations are mostly classified, this dissertation does not further elaborate on the location and nature of Dutch SoF Military Assistance.

9 Wiltenburg, "Security Force Assistance: Practised but not Substantiated." 92.

10 Ibid., 92.

11 The Kingdom of the Netherlands consists of the Netherlands and the islands of St. Maarten, Aruba and Curacao in the Caribbean. Here, any reference to 'the Netherlands' refers to the country of the Netherlands, rather than the Kingdom of the Netherlands.

12 Biehl, Giegerich, and Jonas, *Strategic Cultures in Europe*, 262.

role to the application of military force."[13] The Atlanticist tenet is based on the US leadership of the Western world, together with capitalism, freedom and democracy. Alternatively, the continental European tenet is more focused towards the European model of cooperation and integration which foster economic prosperity.[14] The continental-European approach is represented in the Dutch preference to utilise the armed forces to project stability and to promote the international rule of law.[15] Secondly, the Atlanticist approach constitutes the use of the military as a power instrument and as an opportunity to increase political relevance and is represented by the willingness to contribute to hazardous military operations such as the Dutch mission in Uruzgan, Afghanistan.[16] In the decision-making process preceding the utilisation of its military forces, the Netherlands dither on these two tenets.

The Netherlands deem NATO the cornerstone of their security strategy, and therefore have a strong incentive to align with the US, the largest contributor to the alliance.[17] Displaying solidarity with the US and NATO, the Dutch are ready to deploy forces for the aforementioned hazardous operations abroad. Still, the Netherlands usually demand that these operations are legitimate and have an international mandate. Moreover, the Netherlands military contributions are usually embedded within a larger civil-military operation in order to promote security, stability and the international rule of law.[18] This bipolar approach allows the Dutch military to conduct operations with states that prefer a more military-focused approach to international conflict such as the US, and states that prefer a less-bellicose approach towards conflict resolution such as Germany. The strategic dithering between these two tenets, however, does appear somewhat schizophrenic in balancing between the European and the Anglo-Saxon powerhouses.[19]

Still, in line with other European states, the Netherlands have a preference to use the military for rather less violent stability operations, peacebuilding missions and other

13 Arie Rem Korteweg, *The Superpower, the Bridge-builder and the Hesitant Ally: How Defense Transformation Divided NATO (1991–2008)* (Leiden University Press, 2011).

14 Korteweg, *The Superpower, the Bridge-builder and the Hesitant Ally*, 366.

15 Ibid. 366.

16 Ibid., 223.

17 Wiltenburg and Van der Vorm, "Small State Strategic Thinking"; Korteweg, *The Superpower, the Bridge-builder and the Hesitant Ally*, 223.

18 Adviesraad Internationale Vraagstukken, Europese Defensiesamenwerking Soevereiniteit en Handelingsvermogen, Den Haag, 2012, https://www.adviesraadinternationalevraagstukken.nl/binaries/adviesraadinternationalevraagstukken/documenten/publicaties/2012/01/27/europese-defensiesamenwerking/Europese_defensiesamenwerking_AIV-advies-78_201201.pdf.

19 Korteweg, *The Superpower, the Bridge-builder and the Hesitant Ally*, 217.

deployments to support the international rule of law.[20] As Korteweg states: "Core elements of Dutch strategic culture are emphasizing stability through stimulating institution building, embracing pacifism while shunning power politics, and achieving security ends by being virtuous instead of militarily victorious."[21] This is a consequence of the complex decision-making process that preludes military deployments, considering the fragmented multi-party parliament that needs to support any deployment in majority. Noll and Moelker explain that the nature of the Dutch political system and the necessity for political coalitions make it complex for a government to act on its own ambitions, as some political parties might support peace-building and reconstruction efforts, but oppose more kinetic military involvement.[22] This process thus leads to the use of euphemisms for warfare as political parties across the entire political spectrum must be appeased in order to gain their support. This is illustrated by describing the post-WW2 colonial wars in the Dutch East Indies as 'police actions' (*politionele acties*), and the use of the phrase '*opbouwmissie*,' or reconstruction mission, for the Dutch counterinsurgency efforts in Afghanistan.[23] Also, during the Dutchbat deployments in Srebrenica, arguably one of the darkest days of the Dutch armed forces post-WW2, it was decided that Dutch armoured infantry vehicles bearing a 25 mm cannon would be too aggressive-looking, so instead it was opted to only equip the Dutch YPR-type vehicles with a heavy machine gun.[24] Contemporarily, parliamentary reluctance to engage in kinetic military actions has led increasingly to parliamentary micro-management and excessive national caveats.[25] Illustrative of the top-down implemented frustration to the Dutch military efforts is the Dutch mission in Kunduz province, during which national caveats led to an utter unworkable situation.[26]

After the Dutch participation in the Iraq war in 2003–2005, the Dutch promoted the 'Dutch Approach,' a "vaguely defined idea of a better, subtle, comprehensive and culturally aware national approach—a national way of war."[27] The 'Dutch Approach' would constitute of a

20 Ibid., 223.

21 Ibid., 222.

22 Biehl, Giegerich, and Jonas, *Strategic Cultures in Europe*.

23 Korteweg, *The Superpower, the Bridge-builder and the Hesitant Ally*, 239.

24 Tweede Kamer der Staten-Generaal "Kamerstuk 28506," 27 January 2003, https://zoek.officielebekendmakingen.nl/kst-28506-5.html. Accessed 23/09/2021.

25 See: Stephen Saideman and David P. Auerswald, *Comparing Caveats: Understanding the Sources of National Restrictions upon NATO's Mission in Afghanistan*, International Studies Quarterly (2012) 56, 67–84.

26 These caveats included limitations on the geographic dispersion of the trainees, as well as limiting their operational tasks. All in all, this has proven to be an utterly unworkable situation. For a full disclosure, see: Buitenlandse Zaken, "Op Zoek Naar Draagvlak: de Geïntegreerde Politietrainingsmissie in Kunduz, Afghanistan."

27 Thijs Brocades Zaalberg, "The Use and Abuse of the 'Dutch Approach'to Counter-Insurgency," *Journal of Strategic Studies* 36, no. 6 (2013).

less violent and population centric way of operations, and offer a separate option to the more kinetic oriented US approach. The 'Dutch Approach' was subsequently propagated to the Dutch parliament to promote the controversial deployment to Uruzgan province, Afghanistan between 2006 and 2010. Although now in disuse, the 'Dutch Approach' adequately describes the Dutch strategic culture in showing the willingness to participate, even in combat, but reluctance in promoting the use of force if not absolutely necessary, instead focusing the integration of diplomacy and development into their approach.

As a small state with large interests in the international community, Dutch strategic culture reflects these international interests its international security policy. In 2013, the main strategic interests were described as the defence of the territory of both the Kingdom of the Netherlands as well as allied states, a well-functioning international order and economic security.[28] The 2018 Defence white paper reiterated these strategic pillars, albeit in slightly different terms: to remain secure in the Kingdom of the Netherlands and Europe, to foster security in Europe's neighbouring regions and to secure connections to and from the Netherlands.[29]

In order to meet these stated strategic interests, the Dutch contribute and have contributed to many international missions, both SFA-type as well as others.[30] As the Dutch recognise the limits of the size of its armed forces, the common policy is not to engage in military operations in isolation, but always in a coalition of states.[31] Contributing to international missions is important for the Netherlands for two main reasons. In the first place, it fosters their relationship with the US, the hegemonic Western military power and the Netherlands' main ally since World War 2.[32] As accusations of freeriding under the US security umbrella have increased both in frequency as well as severity over the last decade, the Dutch endeavour to regularly contribute to the NATO alliance by other means such as participation in international missions, whilst simultaneously avoiding increasing the defence budget

28 International Security Strategy: A Secure Netherlands in a Secure World https://www.government.nl/binaries/government/documents/policy-notes/2013/06/21/international-security-strategy/ivs-engels.pdf, 1.

29 Dutch Ministry of Defense, "2018 Defence White Paper: Investing in our People, Capabilities and Visibility," (The Hague 2018), 7.

30 Defensie, "Current Missions," https://english.defensie.nl/topics/missions-abroad/current-missions.

31 Koninklijke Landmacht, "Veiligheid is vooruitzien," https://www.defensie.nl/binaries/defensie/documenten/publicaties/2018/11/05/toekomstvisie-koninklijke-landmacht/Veiligheid+is+vooruitzien.+De+toekomstvisie+Koninklijke+Landmacht.pdf.

32 Dick Zandee, "Dutch Security and Defence: From Atlantis to Europa?," *Militaire Spectator*, 8 January 2019, https://spectator.clingendael.org/nl/publicatie/dutch-security-and-defence-atlantis-europa.

beyond the public approval threshold.[33] As such, over the last fifteen years, the Dutch contributed heavily, relative to its size, to the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, providing not only a substantial military delegation but also adding legitimacy to both wars by its substantial involvement.[34]

The second reason for participation is because the Dutch government greatly values international rule of law.[35] The promotion of the international rule of law is one of the constitutional reasons for the use of the armed forces, the other constitutional proclaimed purposes being the territorial defence of both the Dutch kingdom and its allies, as well protection of the interests of the Kingdom.[36] The use for the armed forces for the promotion of international rule of law and other, mostly humanitarian, reasons is moreover better accepted by the Dutch populace than more violent interventions.[37]

However, the recent Dutch policy on using the armed forces -including its deployment to Afghanistan- contains two important constraints. In the first place, Dutch military deployments are formally capped in both time and size. The number of personnel allocated to a deployment, as well as the period they are to be deployed, are agreed on by the government and parliament.[38] Although not bound to by law, it has become custom to gauge every military deployment over a framework that includes the necessity of the mission, the size and scope, consequences for army readiness and several other military and political factors. Usually, the period for deployments is set on two years or less, albeit with the possibility for extension. The limited time and scope of military mission leads to the second constraint in Dutch military strategy: the results of interventions are stated as a relative towards the outset of the deployment, as the mission end state of recent interventions has not been reached within the allotted timeframe. This leads to statements such as "the security in

33 Jo Jakobsen, "Is European NATO Really Free-riding? Patterns of Material and Non-material Burden-sharing after the Cold War," *European Security* 27, no. 4 (2018): 490, https://doi.org/10.1080/09662839.2018.1515072.

34 Olivier Schmitt, "More Allies, Weaker Missions? How Junior Partners Contribute to Multinational Military Pperations," *Contemporary Security Policy* 40, no. 1 (2019): 77, https://doi.org/10.1080/13523260.2018.1501999.

35 Toespraak van minister Grapperhaus aan de Károli Gáspár Universiteit https://www.rijksoverheid.nl/documenten/toespraken/2019/02/22/speech-by-the-minister-of-justice-ferdinand-grapperhaus-at-karoli-gaspar-university-budapest-21-february-2019. Accessed 14/02/2020

36 The Constitution of the Kingdom of the Netherlands 2008, https://www.government.nl/documents/regulations/2012/10/18/the-constitution-of-the-kingdom-of-the-netherlands-2008, article 97.

37 Matt Bassford et al., *Strengths and Weaknesses of the Netherlands Armed Forces*, (RAND Corporation, 2010), 29–30.

38 For a full description on the formal parliamentary proceedings of Dutch military deployments see: https://www.parlementairemonitor.nl/9353000/1/j9vvij5epmj1ey0/vjgsnjbbhxye.

Afghanistan has been improved since the commencement of the mission," etc.[39] The fact that the relative improvements can be adduced are forthcoming of the vague and relative grounds for participation as stated by the government.

Furthermore, the government of the Netherlands is careful to avoid ownership of the problem the intervention seeks to solve, and instead focuses on themes such as "solidarity with the alliance," "limit illegal immigration," "prevent terrorism," and "improve international cooperation."[40] Although this is understandable considering the size of the country, this limited approach has led in recent years to criticism from several scholars in the Netherlands. These critics have alleged the Dutch government of "strategic illiteracy," "strategic vagueness," and bemoaned the demise of military strategy in the Dutch political discourse.[41] This scholarly criticism was seconded by senior army officers, even to the extent that the Dutch commanding officer in Uruzgan province, Afghanistan, noted that the strategy for the International Security Assistance Force mission in Uruzgan was in effect a grassroots process, and no strategy was present when the first Task Force arrived in Afghanistan.[42]

In a similar vein, the 2018 narrative for the recent Dutch deployment to the Capacity Building Mission in Iraq indicated that the deployment was to "improve the international rule of law," and to "contribute to de-escalating the regional situation."[43] In conformation with the above, the mission was capped in both personnel as well as time, limiting the deployment to a year, six F-16 combat aircraft, and trainers for Kurdish *Peshmerga* and Iraqi troops.

Military strategy is intended to achieve political ends through the employment of (primarily) military means. For the Dutch armed forces, it is impossible to produce the desired political output when that output is unknown, or at best relative to the situation at the beginning of the mission. And even so, measuring success would be considerably in the eye of the beholder. Dutch military deployments are therefore not a product of sound military strategy, but rather

39 See: https://zoek.officielebekendmakingen.nl/kst-27925-611.html (official correspondence from the Minister of Defence to the Dutch Parliament 11/09/2017).

40 Ministerie van Buitenlandse Zaken, Wereldwijd voor een Veilig Nederland - Geïntegreerde Buitenland- en Veiligheidsstrategie 2018-2022 https://www.government.nl/latest/news/2018/03/20/working-worldwide-for-the-security-of-the-netherlands-an-integrated-international-security-strategy-2018-2022, 19–20.

41 Martijn Kitzen and Floor Thönissen, "Strategische vaagheid: Hoe het gebrek aan strategische visie het lerend vermogen van de Koninklijke Landmacht beperkt," *Militaire Spectator* 187, no. 4 (2018), 206–23; Hermanus Amersfoort, "Nederland, de weg kwijt: Over de teloorgang van de militaire strategie en de noodzaak van geschiedenis," *Militaire Spectator* 185, no. 5 (2016). IGBM Duyvesteyn, "Strategisch analfabetisme: de kunst van strategisch denken in moderne militaire operaties," (2013).

42 Farrell, Osinga, and Russell, *Military Adaptation in Afghanistan*, 167.

43 Defence and Development Ministers of Foreign Affairs, "Bestrijding Internationaal Terrorisme," *Tweede Kamer der Staten Generaal* (2018).

an outcome of policy. The policy on which the deployment is based is openly stated in formal parliamentary documents. The Dutch policy goals would include being a "reliable partner," doing a "fair share" concerning military missions abroad and showing "commitment."[44] To participate, bounded in time and effort, seems to be the dominant 'Dutch' verb in regard to military interventions.

This is not so say that the Dutch government is unaware or ignorant of current international affairs. The Dutch minister of defence acknowledges the need for a "strategic military intervention" in Afghanistan, the threat from Russia and jihadists and the increasing geopolitical instability.[45] However, it appears that the Dutch government generally wants to avoid any form of lasting commitment to these issues. Rather, it is restating the desire for international cooperation and comprehensive conflict resolution. The abrupt withdrawal of the Dutch mission in the Afghan province of Uruzgan and the subsequent deployment to Kunduz province (2011–2013) form a case in point. The 2010 withdrawal from Uruzgan was a result of partisan politics within the coalition government rather than strategic considerations.[46] After this alliance defection, the Netherlands desired to make amends to the international coalition for Afghanistan in order to repair some of the damage the sudden withdrawal from Uruzgan had caused to the reputation of a reliable ally.[47] After much political handwringing, the flawed "integrated police training mission" to Kunduz province was agreed upon.[48]

As a small state, the Netherlands puts a premium on international cooperation, coalition efforts and alliance adherence.[49] This portends the dearth of independent grand strategic

44 Ministers of Foreign Affairs, "Bestrijding Internationaal Terrorisme," 2.

45 Tweede Kamer der Staten-Generaal "Kamerstuk 27925," 13 September 2017, 10, https://zoek.officielebekendmakingen.nl/kst-27925-611.html (official correspondence from the Minister of Defence to the Dutch Parliament 11/09/2017); Tweede Kamer der Staten Generaal, "Kamerstuk 29521," 27 August 2018, 2, https://zoek.officielebekendmakingen.nl/kst-29521-363.html (official correspondence from the Minister of Defence to the Dutch Parliament).

46 See: Reed Stevenson and Aaron Gray-Block, "Dutch Government Falls over Afghan Troop Mission," *Reuters*, 20 February 2010, https://www.reuters.com/article/us-dutch-government/dutch-cabinet-falls-over-afghanistan-media-idUSTRE61J0FS20100220.

47 Massie, "Why Democratic Allies Defect Prematurely: Canadian and Dutch Unilateral Pullouts from the War in Afghanistan," 99–100.

48 See: Richard Weitz "The Netherlands and Afghanistan: NATO Solidarity vs. War Wariness," *World Politics Review*, 25 January 2011,https://www.worldpoliticsreview.com/articles/7669/the-netherlands-and-afghanistan-nato-solidarity-vs-war-wariness.

49 Dutch Government White Paper, "Working Worldwide for the Security of the Netherlands: An Integrated International Security Strategy 2018–2022," https://www.government.nl/latest/news/2018/03/20/working-worldwide-for-the-security-of-the-netherlands-an-integrated-international-security-strategy-2018-2022.

formulation, and indeed the Dutch rather delegate this to either their hegemonic ally or international institutions such as the EU or NATO. Although this is reasonable considering the lack of independent power instruments in possession of the Netherlands, it does position them in a supportive role during military interventions. As the Netherlands are not aspiring another leading role after the 2006–2010 ISAF deployment in Uruzgan province, Afghanistan, this fits into the current Dutch security and foreign policy.[50]

Therefore, SFA-type operations are suited for Dutch policy makers. SFA-type operations allow for tailor-made participation, capped both in personnel and time. Also, the perceived low-cost and low-risk attributes of these missions allow for a positive strategic narrative to the populace, as training, advising and assisting are generally better appreciated than high-risk combat operations.[51] Being in a supporting role, the criticism of a 'too technical approach' towards SFA does not affect Dutch policy makers, but rather the missions' principal initiators. Instead, this limited and technical approach does fit the Netherlands, as this allows smaller training missions, with a distinct focus on short-term tactical improvements by the training audience.

While this explains why Dutch foreign policy is comfortable to settle for SFA-type operations, it does not expound on any reasons why the Dutch armed forces do not push back on a military activity with a chequered success record. To appreciate this, one must consider the state of the Dutch armed forces after years of financial neglect.

4.1.2 The Dutch Political Decision-making Process

With regards to the deployment of the state's armed forces, the Dutch constitution dictates that "[t]here shall be armed forces for the defence and protection of the interests of the Kingdom, and in order to maintain and promote the international legal order."[52] Moreover, the same article reads that the Dutch government shall have supreme authority over the armed forces. Within the society, the government consists of the King and his ministers. However, one must consider the mostly ceremonial status of the Dutch monarch, thus the prerogative of deploying the Dutch armed forces lies with the Cabinet. The Dutch House of Representatives, the lower house of the bicameral parliament of the Dutch state (the other house being the Senate), is the state's main legislative body, and one of its main tasks is to review the actions of the entire cabinet (the ministers and secretaries of state), which includes de facto the government.

50 Ibid.

51 Bassford et al., *Strengths and Weaknesses of the Netherlands Armed Forces*.

52 Article 97 Dutch constitution, https://www.government.nl/documents/regulations/2012/10/18/the-constitution-of-the-kingdom-of-the-netherlands-2008 accessed 20/05/2022.

In order to review any deployment of the armed forces, the Dutch constitution demands that the government informs the States General (the States General consist of both the House of Representatives as well as the Senate) in advance if the armed forces are to be deployed. This includes the deployment of forces in order to maintain or promote the international legal order and the provision of humanitarian aid in the event of armed conflict. The Dutch government informs both houses by means of a so-called Article 100-letter.[53] Article 100 refers to the article in the Dutch constitution, which was amended in 2000 after Parliament wished for more parliamentary control on the deployment of the armed forces. Although formally the House of Representatives does not have to consent, it has become common practice for any deployment to have at least a majority in the lower house. Naturally, some events prohibit informing Parliament before the actual deployment, in which case both houses have to be informed at the earliest opportunity.

4.1.3 The Dutch Armed Forces Structure

The Dutch armed forces consist of four branches: the Royal Netherlands Navy (RNLN), including the Royal Netherlands Marine Corps (RNLMC), the Royal Dutch Air Force (RNLAF) and the Royal Dutch Army (RNLA). The Royal Dutch Marechaussee, the military police corps, was separated from the Dutch Army and formed into a separate branch in 1998.[54] The Dutch armed forces are small, but consist of high-tech assets across all branches. The Dutch armed forces are an all-volunteer force, which together with high standards in mandatory schooling leads to a highly educated, professional force.

The Royal Netherlands Navy's fleet is based in Den Helder, and maintains a force of frigates and submarines. Due to the landlocked nature of Afghanistan, the Dutch Royal Navy did not significantly contribute to the Uruzgan deployment. However, besides its floating assets, the Navy operated two battalion-sized Marine infantry units, which are considered an elite fighting force. The Dutch Marines contributed both to the Battle groups, adding company-sized elements to the stretched Army battalions, as well as staffing sections of the Operation Mentoring and Liaison Teams. Also, the Royal Dutch Marines operate a special forces element that was regularly deployed to Afghanistan, mostly jointly with the Army SF-group.[55]

The RNLAF consists of a fleet of sixty-one updated, but ageing F-16 fighters that are generally being replaced by forty-five F-35 fighters. Besides the fighter aircraft, the RNLAF has the disposal of medium and light transport helicopters, and twenty-six AH-64D Apache combat

53 Article 100 Dutch constitution. https://www.government.nl/documents/regulations/2012/10/18/the-constitution-of-the-kingdom-of-the-netherlands-2008 accessed 20/05/2022.

54 Koninklijke Marechaussee, "Geschiedenis Marechaussee," https://www.defensie.nl/organisatie/marechaussee/geschiedenis.

55 Ten Cate and Van Der Vorm, *Callsign Nassau: Dutch Special Forces in Action in the 'New World Disorder'*, 230.

helicopters to support the RNLA's Air-assault brigade. Although most states subordinate transport and combat helicopters under the land component of the armed forces, the Dutch have opted to have the RNLAF operate these aircraft, arguably to maintain enough mass to justify the RNLAF as a separate branch. The RNLAF also has four C-130 cargo aircraft and two KDC-10 tanker aircraft, the latter also being replaced due to their age. All of the assets mentioned above were used to provide air power to the Dutch Task Force in Uruzgan.

The RNLA consists of three combat brigades and one support brigade, each equipped for a different role. These brigades have withered under the aforementioned budget cuts, with four of its armoured battalions sold off between 2010–2015. This has left the Dutch Army in 2022 with a mechanised, motorised and air assault brigade for combat operations, which have integrated in German divisions wherever possible.[56] In 2006, however, the Dutch Army combat brigades comprised of a light (air-assault) capacity and a mechanised (two brigades) capacity. However, both mechanised brigades of the Dutch land forces only possessed two combat battalions, which is widely considered to be short of the necessary combat power of a brigade, and short of the NATO requirements for combat brigades.[57] As such, it is recognised that the Dutch Army had lost its ability to fight in a conventional war and that the army was not able to fulfil its constitutional task of defending the national and allied territory.[58] However, in a bid for relevancy, the Dutch Army elected to staff the Task Force Uruzgan and its subsidiaries.

Since the end of the Cold War, successive Dutch administrations have reduced funding to the armed forces, as it was perceived that with the end of the Warsaw Pact, a large standing army was no longer necessary. Instead, the Dutch armed forces refocused on peace and stabilisation missions, with counterinsurgency later added to the repertoire of operations. The Dutch armed forces were supposed to function like a proverbial Swiss army knife, with all kinds of functions present in a single package. This approach has left the Dutch military with multiple functionalities, but lacks the ability to continue operations, as most functionalities have been limited to (or below) the bare minimum.[59] Dutch military ambitions have simultaneously declined since the end of the Cold War. In 2006 the Dutch military ambition

56 The mechanized brigade has integrated into the German 1st Armoured division, and the Air Assault brigade has integrated into the German high readiness brigade (Division Schnelle Kräfte).

57 Ivor Wiltenburg, "Het Richten van de Landmacht: Een Assessment van Legervorming en Militair Vermogen met 13 Lichte Brigade als Case."

58 Emilie van Outeren, "Grondwettelijke Taak Defensie Staat op het Spel," *NRC Handelsblad*, 19 May 2016 (Constitutional Tasks of the Army at Risk), https://www.nrc.nl/nieuws/2016/05/19/grondwettelijke-taak-defensie-staat-op-het-spel-1622681-a875662; Wiltenburg, "Het Richten van de Landmacht"; Interview Andre Bosman, MP VVD 04-06-2020.

59 Defensie.nl: Nieuwe Commandant voor de Landmacht, https://www.defensie.nl/actueel/nieuws/2019/08/28/nieuwe-commandant-voor-de-landmacht.

included the simultaneous deployment of four battalion-sized elements for a period of three years, as well as a brigade-sized formation in a combat role for a period of one year. In 2018, the Dutch military was only to deploy a battalion-sized element long term, complemented with a battalion and a brigade-sized element short-term.[60] In reality, however, even this level of ambition was and is not attainable by the Dutch Army after years of financial deprivation.

The Dutch Army thus found itself in somewhat of an ambiguous operational environment. Expectations from NATO, the US and the EU include fully equipped combat formations, but concurrent policy makers are not keen to deploy or equip these in a combat role.[61] Deployments are inherently expensive, and invariably lead to additional wear and tear, as well as a fallback in combat readiness after deployment. Rather, the Dutch armed forces prefer to use the time and resources to prepare the formations for future use and to keep the emphasis on the 'combat' theme in training.[62] Whilst the Dutch forces still possess state-of-the-art equipment, the retrenchments have led to a substantial loss in both capacity and capability. However, the aggression by states such as Russia, China and Iran have provided a sincere incentive to increase defence spending.[63] Furthermore, American ire on the unwillingness of many NATO-members, including the Netherlands, to spend 2 per cent of their BPM on defence has further pressured an increase in the Dutch defence budget.[64] The recent increases in budget were primarily used to procure conventional systems in order to restore the manoeuvre warfare capabilities. This repairing of lost capabilities and capacities was much needed, exemplified by signals from both inside as well as outside the Dutch Army. Recently, a NATO review on the Dutch defence capabilities and capacities by NATO's Policy and Planning Committee was highly critical, citing the mismatch between Dutch and NATO priorities and lack of heavy manoeuvre capability for the Dutch Army especially.[65] For the Dutch Army, this denotes amends to the capability and combat capacity of its three

60 A. Bijleveld-Schouten, Defensienota 2018 - investeren in onze mensen, slagkracht en zichtbaarheid, https://www.tweedekamer.nl/kamerstukken/brieven_regering/detail?id=2018Z05368&did=2018D21622

61 Lt. Gen. Wijnen, CiC Dutch Army, Vredesmissies Zijn Geen Toverdrank (Peacemissions Are not a Magic Potion), Ministry of Defence, https://www.defensie.nl/actueel/nieuws/2018/05/30/luitenant-generaal-wijnen-%E2%80%9Cvredesmissies-zijn-geen-toverdrank%E2%80%9D.

62 Martin van der Vorm and Ivor Wiltenburg, "Building without Foundation, the Conceptual Discrepancy of Security Force Assistance," conference paper, Bristol, 2019.

63 MIVD, Vooruitziend Vermogen voor Vrede en Veiligheid, openbaar jaarverslag, 2018 (Dutch Military Intelligence Agency, Foresight into Peace and Security, Public Report, 2018).

64 "Dutch Must Do More to Meet NATO Spending Targets," *Dutchnews.nl*, 29 May 2019, https://www.dutchnews.nl/news/2019/05/dutch-must-do-more-to-meet-nato-spending-targets-us-ambassador/.

65 Ministerie van Buitenlandse Zaken, NAVO-Veiligheid- Defence Planning Capability Review 2019/20: bespreking van Nederlandse defensieplannen: "More Needs to be Done, and with Greater Priority," Den Haag, 2020.

combat brigades.[66] However, slow economic recovery in combination with the COVID-19 outbreak has led to a slowing down of investments for the Dutch armed forces.[67] With the Dutch armed forces not capable of sustaining any sizable deployment in the near future, the Dutch Army will most likely only participate in smaller missions, like the enhanced Forward Presence in Lithuania or SFA-type operations. The participation in smaller missions in a SFA context have several benefits to the Dutch Army. In the first place, it shows the necessity of its forces, countering the 'use it or lose it' tendency as felt by senior policy makers.[68] Also, SFA missions are used as an incentive for Dutch service members to maintain their employment in the Dutch Army, providing them with a 'unique experience' and is often considered an informal reward to be selected for an SFA mission.[69]

4.2 The Decision Path to Uruzgan

In December 2005, Dutch parliament was informed by the Dutch government about the upcoming mission to Uruzgan.[70] The Dutch contribution to ISAF Stage 3 (Southern Afghanistan) was mandated in order to improve the stability and security, to increase support of the local population for the Afghan authorities, and to decrease the support to the Taliban and associated armed groups.[71]

The initial NATO campaign plan for ISAF, approved in 2004 by the North Atlantic Council (NAC), focused on the ISAF deployments in the North and West of Afghanistan. For these areas, the 2004 campaign plan was deemed still sufficient. In relation to the 2006 extension of the ISAF mission in the south and later the east of Afghanistan, where the security situation was less permissive compared to the other parts of the country, it was assessed imperative to adjust the campaign plan. This adjusted campaign plan had been approved by the NAC in 2005 and would be implemented in 2006. The overall goal of the ISAF deployment remained unaltered: assisting the Afghan government by improving stability and security. However, the adjusted campaign plan would allow ISAF, including the Dutch forces, to operate in a more robust way if the situation so demanded. This would include the "execution of

66 Wiltenburg, "Het Richten van de Landmacht.

67 NAVO-Veiligheid-Defence Planning Capability Review 2019/20: Bespreking van Nederlandse defensieplannen: "More Needs to be Done, and with Greater Priority," 10/07/2020.

68 Interview Dutch former member of parliament 132, 04/06/2020; Interview Dutch Army commander 134, 10/07/2020.

69 Survey 'Experiences from Dutch SFA Practitioners on pre-deployment training, execution and evaluation'. Wiltenburg 2019.

70 For further reading regarding the political process leading to the Dutch participation to the ISAF mission in Uruzgan, see: Grandia, *Deadly Embrace: The Decision Paths to Uruzgan and Helmand*; Lenny J. Hazelbag, "Political Decision Making of the Mission in Uruzgan, a Aeconstruction," *Complex Operations: Studies on Lebanon (2006) and Afghanistan (2006–present)* (2009).

71 Paul Ducheine and Eric Pouw, "Legitimizing the Use of Force: Legal Bases for Operations Enduring Freedom and ISAF," in *Mission Uruzgan* (Amsterdam University Press, 2012).

offensive operations against armed opponents when deemed necessary in order to improve the local security situation."[72] It was assessed that the improvement of good governance, efficient host nation security forces and the implementation of the rule of law would form important parts of this operation. To this end, Dutch ISAF personnel would also be tasked with "enabling rebuilding activities and conducting CIMIC and reconstruction activities."[73]

The integration of efforts between the Afghan security services and the Dutch Army efforts was emphasised in the letter to Dutch Parliament. The Dutch concept of operations recognised a population-centric approach for the Dutch military presence as key to a successful mission. To this end, the Dutch would "show respect for all parts of the population, have an open attitude, and conduct 'presence patrols' and have extensive contact with the population."[74] Any patrols and possible offensive operations would, in principle, always be conducted in close cooperation with the Afghan security forces.[75]

After the Dutch government had communicated its intent in taking part in the extension of the ISAF campaign earlier in 2005,[76] several reconnaissance detachments travelled to Uruzgan province for a fact-finding mission. The first, a four-man strong contingent of a *National Intelligence Support Team* (NIST), arrived in the provincial capital Tarin Kowt on 11 May 2005. Its objective was to gather data on the terrain, the people, the Afghan government structures and coalition forces already present in the area. The report produced by this reconnaissance party stated that in Uruzgan, the security situation was deteriorating.[77] A subsequent fact-finding mission by Dutch Special Operations Forces (SOF) reiterated this message. The commandos scouted the area together with Australian and US SOF already in Uruzgan, and concluded that the main effort would be combating the Taliban, and that little reconstruction had taken place. In fact, the detachment of the "Korps Commandotroepen" (KCT), as the main exponent of Dutch SOF capacity, stated that Uruzgan was "Taliban's home turf" and that serious fighting would have to precede stabilising and securing the province.[78] Notwithstanding this assessment, the Dutch government would ultimately decide positively to the deployment, although a significant effort was made to convince predominantly progressive political parties that the focus would lie on reconstruction efforts that would be made to improve the lives of the people in Uruzgan. The political discussion regarding the dichotomy between a 'reconstruction mission' and a 'combat mission' would be a recurring

72 Parliamentary Papers II, 2005–06, 27925, 193; 13.

73 Ibid., 3.

74 Ibid., 14.

75 Ibid., 14.

76 Parliamentary Papers II, 2004–05, 27925, 158.

77 Ten Cate and Van Der Vorm, *Callsign Nassau: Dutch Special Forces in Action in the 'New World Disorder'*, 230.

78 Ibid, 231.

event over the next few years, although both terms are non-existent within the Dutch military discourse and doctrine.[79]

After a Deployment Task Force paved the way in the first half of 2006, the first Task Force Uruzgan (TFU), under command of Colonel Theo Vleugels, started operations in Uruzgan in August 2006. In this period, the TFU intended to pursue a classical counterinsurgency campaign, based on the ideas of theorists such as David Galula, Frank Kitson and Robert Thomson.[80] The 'clear-hold-build' adage, which was often used, has its roots in Thomson's writings.[81] It denotes that the counterinsurgency force would have to first 'clear' an area of insurgents, followed by a period of 'holding' the area using armed force, which was to be used to 'build' the relationship between the local populace and the government. The latter aspect was executed in multiple ways, and it was commonly known as 'winning hearts and minds' (WHAM). Indeed, all classical COIN-theorists stressed the importance of the local population, as without local support an insurgency would have little chance of succeeding.

Two Afghan Development Zones (ADZ) were identified around the main Uruzgan towns of Tarin Kowt and Deh Rawood. TFU 1 intended to establish a strong foothold in these areas, gradually expanding their influence in the spirit of French general Hubert Lyautey's theories (1854–1934), for which he used the metaphor of a *tache d'huile*.[82] Early attempts by the TFU to win the hearts and minds of the local population included plans to stay and live with the local population, which would include 'platoon houses' in the populated green zone.[83] For tactical reasons however—being close to the population would mean a high risk of close combat with infiltrating ACM, and thus casualties—these platoon houses were relocated to the high grounds further out, resulting in the patrol bases (PB) of Poentjak (Derashan Valley) and Volendam (north of Deh Rawood), which were rather ineffective due to the distance from the local population.[84]

79 Kitzen et al., "Soft Power, the Hard Way"; Farrell, Osinga, and Russell, *Military Adaptation in Afghanistan*, 170, 176; Parliamentary Papers II, 27925, 203; Hans van Griensven "It's All about the Afghan People: Eén jaar 1 (NLD/AUS) 'Task Force Uruzgan,'" *Atlantisch Perspectief* 31, No. 6 (2007): 4–10.

80 For further reading on this subject see: Frank Kitson, "Low Intensity Operations," *Subversion, Insurgency, Peace-keeping, London* (1971); Leroy Thompson, *Counter Insurgency Manual* (Frontline Books, 2002); David Galula, *Counterinsurgency Warfare: Theory and Practice* (Greenwood Publishing Group, 2006); Ralph Coenen, "Counterinsurgency Operaties: Geen Succesvol Optreden Zonder Gedegen Kennis." *Carré* (2007): 18-20.

81 For a comparison of classical counterinsurgency theorists see: M. Huizing, "Basisprincipes van klassieke counterinsurgency," *Militaire Spectator* 181, no. 2 (2012): 44–58.

82 A. C. Tjepkema, "Lyautey en de inktvlek," *Militaire Spectator* 177, no. 12 (2008).

83 P. van der Sar, "Kick the Enemy Where It Hurts Most," *Carre*, no. 1 (2007).

84 Interview P. van der Sar by Martijn Kitzen, 28/09/2009.

In the period 2006–2010, the Dutch Army deployed Operational Mentoring and Liaison Teams, or OMLTs in Afghanistan. This was a direct result of the expansion of the NATO-led International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) operation into the south of Afghanistan. In December 2005, the Dutch parliament was informed by the Dutch government per an Article 100-letter about the upcoming mission to Uruzgan. The mission was mandated in order to improve the stability and security, increasing support of the local population for the Afghan authorities, and to decrease the support to the Taliban and associated groups.[85]

The integration of efforts between the Afghan security services and the Dutch Army efforts was emphasised in the letter to parliament. The Dutch concept of operations recognised the support of the population for the Dutch military presence as key to a successful mission. To this end, the Dutch patrol would "show respect for all layers of the population, have an open attitude, and conduct 'presence patrols' and have extensive contact with the population."[86] Any patrols and possible offensive operations would, in principle, always be conducted in close cooperation with the Afghan security forces.[87]

With the implementation of the new campaign plan, more emphasis was thus placed with the reinforcement of the Afghan security services, both the Afghan National Army as well as the different Afghan Police institutions. In the letter to parliament, the ANA would be supported by a single Dutch OMLT, who would educate, monitor and mentor the ANA-battalions.[88] With the addition of the Dutch OMLT to the ISAF campaign, a two-year effort was initiated to train, advise and assist the Afghan National Army in the Uruzgan and Kandahar provinces.[89] This period, totalling four years of Dutch SFA-experience, is best explained in two parts. The first three OMLTs were small units of maximal twenty-four personnel, led by a major, with little oversight from either TFU or BG and with a distinct focus on small unit tactics. Later, when the importance of the SFA-operation sank in, the Dutch OMLT expanded to a broader organisation, with a full colonel in charge. Besides small-unit tactics, the SFA-effort was also eventually expanded towards combat support and combat service support activities. This section will first describe the initial three OMLT-rotations, and subsequently the larger, better organised OMLTs.

85 Tweede Kamer der Staten Generaal "Kamerstuk 27925," 22 December 2005, https://www.parlement.com/9291000/d/uruzganbesluit_2005.pdf, 3.

86 Ibid., 1-27

87 Ibid., 1-27

88 Ibid., 1-27

89 The initial period was two years, although ultimately the Dutch commitment would last four years.

4.2.1 OMLT 1

In 2006, the Dutch Army was assigned to staff the OMLTs. Because Military Assistance was embedded in the Dutch Special Forces doctrine, the missions was initially assigned to the Korps Commandotroepen (KCT), as the main exponent of Dutch SF capacity. However, the KCT was unable to execute this mission, as it was already preoccupied with other operations abroad, including Afghanistan (Kandahar).[90] This led to the decision by the Army HQ to assign the OMLT's staffing to 11 Airmobile Brigade (11 AMB). This elite light infantry brigade complied, subsequently staffing the majority of the early OMLT-rotations.[91]

However, in the planning for the Uruzgan mission, all battalions in the Dutch Army had been assigned a slot in the scheme of rotation for the Dutch Battlegroups, and therefore had few personnel to spare. As it was perceived that the Uruzgan mission was to be one of the most 'kinetic' and inherently dangerous missions of recent years, the commanding officers of the Battlegroups were highly reluctant to spare any, let alone the most capable, NCOs and officers to staff other units such as the OMLT. In the preparation for the Uruzgan mission, the commanding officers of the regular battalions already had to handpick capable NCOs and officers to fill in the gaps in their own organisation before shipping off to Uruzgan. These practices left scarce opportunity to adequately staff the OMLT.

The first Dutch OMLT's staffing was initiated by appointing the commanding officer of a combat support unit of 11 AMB not assigned to participate in the Uruzgan deployment: 11 Mortar Company. This officer, then Major Richard Stet, subsequently handpicked as many able personnel from his own subunit, and subsequently escalated to the brigade level for additional personnel. A brigade-wide search delivered "adventurers and adrenaline seekers",[92] as the mentoring mission was then understood to be a mirror-image of the exploits of the US Operational Detachment Alpha's 595, in what was later dubbed by Biddle as the "Afghan model" of operations.[93] In this image, Stet compiled a list of demands which would be held against the experience and capabilities of OMLT-applicants. This list detailed OMLT-personnel to have experience within either an infantry or a reconnaissance unit, and experience as a platoon sergeant for NCOs and as a platoon or company commander for officers. Stet assessed that in order to mentor and train an Afghan unit, first-hand subject matter expertise on the topics that would be mentored and trained would be instrumental. Unfortunately, these demands could not be met, as insufficient numbers of personnel could be located that held these experiences and qualifications. Eventually, a blend of

90 For further reading on the Dutch Special Operations Forces activities during this period, see: Arthur ten Cate and Martijn van der Vorm, *Callsign Nassau: het moderne Korps Commandotroepen 1989–2012* (Boom, 2012), 202-233.

91 Leeuwenburg and Wiltenburg, *Met Geweer en Geduld*, 50.

92 Interview Dutch INF OMLT CO 73, 04/03/2020.

93 Biddle, "Allies, Airpower, and Modern Warfare," 161.

NCOs and officers was attached to OMLT 1 with only a few meeting the initial commanders' requirements. OMLT 1 also was capped to only twelve personnel, although the ISAF and NATO demands required a twenty-four-man strong team for any OMLT.[94]

Although the Article 100-letter stated that the Netherlands would provide one OMLT for the ISAF mission in Afghanistan, it was unknown to the participants what the mission would constitute.[95] When Stet was appointed in April 2006, he had a three-month window to execute a threefold mission: to assemble and train his team, to formulate an operational concept and to write the job descriptions of the team. At this stage, it was unknown how long the mission would last, and what the scheme of operations would be when in theatre. Through an accidental contact in Kabul, the possibility to take NATO's OMLT training course at the Joint Multinational Readiness Center in Hohenfels, Germany became known in the Netherlands. Although it became commonplace for later rotations to attend in entirety, the unfamiliarity with the course led to the decision to only send part of OMLT 1 to Germany. As the realities in Germany, Afghanistan and the Netherlands differed somewhat, conflicting information on the OMLT's task and purpose was passed down to Major Stet.

So, unguided by his chain of command, Stet had formulated an operational plan and trained up his team to the best of his ability. Neither the concept of SFA nor operational mentoring had any doctrinal foundation in the Dutch Army at the time, so Stet was left to his own merits with regard to the mission design.[96] As Stet's plan was accorded by his brigade commander and the TFU-commander, then colonel Theo Vleugels, it became apparent that the operations plan as envisioned by Stet would be incompatible with the demands made by the US on any successors of the ETTs—the incumbent mentors to the Afghan forces—whose demands included longer deployments—a minimum of six months, rather than the four that the Dutch Army envisioned—and larger teams and self-sufficiency on both tactical and logistical terms. Still, with the consent of Vleugels, Stet and his team were deployed according to the initial operational plan, lacking half the staff and all the combat support that was deemed necessary by the US.

Major Stet arrived in Afghanistan two weeks ahead of his team. During his first fortnight in Kabul, he was briefed by Canadian and American officers on their expectations of the Dutch OMLT. A field grade officer, Stet found himself stuck between his guidance from Colonel Vleugels and the general grade officers from the US/Canada, restating their demands for a certified OMLT. With the explicit national caveats not to engage in cross-province operations and lacking half of the team, including the 'enablers,' Stet was dismissed with the notion

94 Interview Dutch INF OMLT CO 73, 04/03/2020, Leeuwenburg and Wiltenburg, *Met Geweer en Geduld*, 50–51.

95 Ibid., 04/03/2020, Leeuwenburg and Wiltenburg, *Met Geweer en Geduld*, 52–53.

96 Wiltenburg, "Security Force Assistance: Practised but Not Substantiated," 89–90.

that the ETTs would stay put in Uruzgan as the Dutch, their intended successors, were not in the same league as the US Special Forces and ETTs currently working with the ANA.[97]

Upon the arrival of the rest of OMLT 1 in Afghanistan, an acclimatisation period in Kandahar followed the mandatory three-day OMLT-course in Kabul. During the acclimatisation period, Stet reshuffled his teams as tensions rose between several team members. Stet had envisioned a system of officer/non-commissioned officer duos in his operational plan, who would be attached to the Afghan platoons in order to train them. In this way, the duos would emulate the common Lieutenant/Sergeant pairing that constitutes platoon leadership in many Western armies. Due to the staffing process, however, Stet did not command a homogenous unit, but a mix of officers and NCOs with different backgrounds, including cadre from Combat Support units. Although everyone within the Air Assault Brigade is expected to master basic infantry skills, a significant difference is discerned between the infantry NCOs and the Combat Support officers with regard to their combat prowess. Although this is not necessarily a problem—ANA battalions would eventually also have to be mentored on Combat Support and Combat Service Support issues—the presumption of the OMLT tasks in 2006 was that they would fight unsupported by Western units amongst the ANA. Therefore, the infantry NCOs within OMLT 1 were adamant that their officers would match their combat skills. As it were, a certain level of distrust had developed during the first combined training exercises, which culminated during the field training exercise in Hohenfels and resurfaced in the initial stages of the deployment.

Having to decide between repatriating some of his already understaffed team or reorganising the 'duos,' Stet opted for the latter, resulting in an 'officers duo' and 'noncom-duos.' In both Tarin Kowt as well as Deh Rawood, the duos would report to a team lead, who reported to the command element led by Stet and his executive officer.[98]

In Stet's perception, his OMLT would mentor two Afghan kandaks, including the kandak staff, and OMLT 1 would be supported in that role by the Battlegroup staff. However, upon arrival, he encountered a different situation. Few Afghan soldiers were present in either Tarin Kowt or Deh Rawood. Moreover, he found that the materiel he requested was not present in Afghanistan. A prolonged period of "borrowing and scavenging" equipment for both themselves as well as the ANA, who were woefully underequipped at the time, commenced.[99] The plans Stet had devised in the Netherlands and during his reconnaissance in June 2006 also proved impracticable. As the Dutch were not certified as an OMLT, which was an ISAF demand, the US ETTs and ODA would not hand over the task of mentoring and training the

97 Interview Dutch INF OMLT CO 73, 04/03/2020; Leeuwenburg and Wiltenburg, *Met Geweer en Geduld*, 54.

98 Interview Dutch INF OMLT CO 73, 04/03/2020; Leeuwenburg and Wiltenburg, *Met Geweer en Geduld*, 55.

99 Interview Dutch INF OMLT CO 73, 04/03/2020; Leeuwenburg and Wiltenburg, *Met Geweer en Geduld*, 56–58.

ANA to the Dutch. With the US paying for the ANA, very little Afghan Army capacity would be left for the Dutch. Indeed, only if neither the US ETT nor ODA needed the ANA would the Dutch OMLT have any leeway with the Afghans. Stet also disagreed with the US approach towards the ANA soldiers. Stet attested that "[t]he US ETTs and ODA use the ANA as a forward element to draw enemy fire, which is subsequently engaged with US-led fire. That is not a way to get the ANA to become a better fighting force; they will never be able to operate independently that way."[100]

Thus upon arrival, the incumbent ETT in Uruzgan was adamant in its assessment that the Dutch OMLT was not capable of relieving the ETTs due to its lack of capacity and capability. Without the formal consent of the US through certification, the Dutch OMLT did not have any rights or leverage on the US ETTs and the Afghan soldiers present. Stet quickly recognised the need to get the ISAF certification, and in close cooperation with Vleugels it was decided that reaching this milestone would be the primary objective of the second rotation.[101]

As for OMLT 1, it started cooperation with both the ANA and its American counterparts in Tarin Kowt and Deh Rawood, the major towns in Uruzgan province. The cooperation with the Dutch Battlegroup would also have to be initiated, as well as with the TFU staff. Initially, it was unknown whether or not the Dutch OMLT would assist the ANA in the remote firebases Cobra and Anaconda, in the north of Uruzgan. Shortly after arrival, however, it became clear that the US would continue to man both firebases—both of which included an ANA detachment—with their ETTs, and that the Dutch efforts would focus on the ANA present in the largest towns of Uruzgan. The OMLT's operational readiness was low initially, as it had trouble locating its equipment in the logistical chaos of Tarin Kowt. A few of its Mercedes Benz 4x4 vehicles had also been requisitioned by the Dutch Battlegroup, further complicating matters.

As the OMLT was gathering its equipment, Stet had to manoeuvre between national caveats, American interests and the TFU/BG demands. As for the national caveats, Dutch politicians were eager not to be involved with any Operation Enduring Freedom (OEF) endeavours, nor to operate outside of the provincial borders. The American ETTs were part of OEF, and as such a form of formal separation between the ETTs and OMLT had to exist, although in practice this distinction was minimal. As OMLT 1 was not a certified OMLT, the ETTs were practically in the lead with regard to the ANA efforts. This was problematic, as very few ANA were present in Uruzgan in 2006. In fact, after a majority of the ANA present were dispatched to FOB Cobra

100 Interview Dutch INF OMLT CO 73, 04/03/2020.

101 Ibid.

in September 2006, only twenty-two Afghan soldiers were present for the Dutch OMLT to mentor in Tarin Kowt.[102]

With few ANA soldiers present, OMLT 1 focused on two lines of operation. The first line of operations consisted of training the Afghan soldiers in basic military skills such as marksmanship, care under fire and patrolling. The second line of operation consisted of joining patrols of the Battlegroup with the ANA troops present. With respect to the training, one OMLT member remarked that "the soldier skills of the ANA are way below acceptable," citing an Afghan soldier with such poor eyesight that he was unable to hit a target a few metres away on the shooting range.[103] Despite serious qualitative shortcomings, no remedial action was taken by Afghan Army leadership, thus impacting the performance of the ANA as a whole. Still, some progress was made, as ANA soldiers incorporated the OMLT's instructions, according to one OMLT member. Eventually, when the OMLT considered the ANA to be up to a minimal standard, they offered ANA troops to the Battlegroup to perform patrols jointly.[104]

Joining the ANA and Battlegroup during patrols constituted the second line of operations. Following the adage 'put an Afghan face on everything,' an Afghan presence during patrols was valued by the TFU. The cooperation with the Dutch Battlegroup still proved a difficult process, as the Afghan soldiers were initially not trusted by their Dutch counterparts. Early patrols, even though they were meant to have an 'Afghan face,' did therefore not include the ANA. The OMLT's efforts to initiate combined operations were also repeatedly hampered as the ANA was withdrawn by the US ODA or ETTs to support OEF operations, even at the eleventh hour.[105] Eventually, even though no substantial numbers were available, a few ANA soldiers with an OMLT team were regularly added to a Battlegroup platoon to show the local populace that the Afghan security forces were working together with ISAF. Within weeks, thirty patrols were supported by an ANA presence. Mostly, the ANA were used to make first contact with the locals, or in the case of a house search, have the Afghans themselves enter first.

Considering the ANA presence in Tarin Kowt, the OMLT actually had overcapacity as three OMLT duos were assigned to the provincial capital. Stet therefore ordered his two non-infantry officers to start mentoring the Afghan Security Guards (ASG). The ASG were local security guards who were tasks to guard the outer ring of Camp Holland in Tarin Kowt. This outer ring consisted of a HESCO-wall, with guard towers every few hundred metres. As this ring was too large to withstand a determined attack, it acted mostly as a tripwire for the inner ring, manned by ISAF forces. Initially hired by the US in Tarin Kowt, the 250-odd ASGs

102 Update Effects Model G5: First Assessment per Effect (1/5) in OWD-280706; FRAGO OP Darius in OWD 250906 and 290906.

103 Interview Dutch mentor 23, 29/04/2020.

104 Interview Dutch mentor 31, 12/03/2020.

105 ISAF Eindevaluatie, 95; Leeuwenburg and Wiltenburg, *Met Geweer en Geduld*, 62–63.

were transferred to the Dutch payroll as the TFU took command of the ISAF operations in Uruzgan.

The ASG was however a "rogue bunch," with no uniforms, proper weaponry, night vision goggles or any military training.[106] As Stet had no meaningful work for his combat support officers, and the ASG was in a deplorable state, the two lieutenants started working on improving the soldier skills of the ASG. The guards were eventually provided with uniforms and weaponry via the OMLT efforts. Moreover, the communication between the outer and inner ring was improved.[107] During the deployment, calamities at the gate were frequently settled through intervention by one of the OMLT members, including a number of incidents involving wounded local nationals who reported to Camp Holland in an attempt to receive medical aid. The OMLT would in this case liaise between the TFU and the ASG.[108]

Deh Rawood had a far smaller Battlegroup presence—only a company—and no TFU staff was present at Camp Hadrian. As the smaller of the two Dutch bases, only a single OMLT pair was stationed there. Without the need to confer with a Battlegroup or TFU staff, the OMLT had more autonomy over its own programme. A sixty-man-strong ANA company was present in Deh Rawood, presenting enough opportunity to the OMLT pair to share their knowledge with the ANA. The Dutch collaborated with the American Operational Detachment Alpha in Deh Rawood, which provided far less of an issue than in Tarin Kowt, and joint Afghan/Dutch/American patrols were a common occurrence, despite the ODA being an OEF-unit. To the dismay of the duo in Deh Rawood, the cooperation with the ODA was suspended after the CO OMLT was informed of the intertwining of OEF and ISAF efforts. Still, even with all the limitations and initial reservations between the US, Afghans and Dutch, OMLT 1 managed to participate in forty-four patrols during their four-month period in Uruzgan.[109]

The OMLT 1 team experienced some teething problems due to the unfamiliarity with the mentoring concept. As such, Major Stet considered the OMLT 1 deployment to be a "fact-finding mission," rather than an actual mentoring deployment. The artificial OEF-ISAF partition thwarted both the integration between the American and Dutch forces, as well as the integration between the ANA and the Dutch. As both the OMLT and the ANA contingent were very small in number, it proved impossible for Stet to leave his mark on the broader TFU campaign. Indeed, the TFU commander did not recall any involvement with the ANA

106 Interview Dutch mentor ASG 45, 29/04/2020.

107 Fragо 029 (ASG Comms), OWD-110806 and 260806.

108 Interview Dutch mentor ASG 45, 29/04/2020; Interview Dutch mentor ASG 41, 26/05/2020; Leeuwenburg and Wiltenburg, *Met Geweer en Geduld*, 59–62; Het Parool: Afghaanse Waakhonden voor Kamp Holland, 04/10/2006.

109 Interview Dutch company mentor 61, 19/05/2020; Interview Dutch mentor 96, 28/04/2020; Leeuwenburg and Wiltenburg, *Met Geweer en Geduld*, 66–71.

or OMLT, as his attention was mostly drawn to the logistical issues that troubled the TFU.[110] Still, a number of key takeaways were forwarded to the successors, including the need for a six-month deployment, and a fully staffed OMLT. These conditions were absolutely adamant if the Dutch OMLT was to be certified. In November 2006, OMLT 1 handed over their tasks to OMLT 2.

4.2.2 OMLT 2

As described in the previous section, the overstretched Dutch Army reached out to the Dutch Marine Corps ("Korps Mariniers") in order to backfill the OMLT. Although Marine leadership did agree to fill a number of officers and NCOs within the OMLT task organisation, it also demanded to provide the commanding officer for every other OMLT rotation. As such, Dutch Royal Marine Major Peter Kersbergen was approached in June 2006 if he would be available to command OMLT 2. At that time, he was working as a staff officer at the Marine Training Command in Doorn, the Netherlands. Although he was at the time unknowledgeable of the specifics of the OMLT work, he gladly accepted the challenge. Kersbergen recalls: "we were unsure whether we would operate outside of the wire, or train the Afghans at the barracks. We did not know between who we would have to liaise. I was really at a loss."[111]

With the discussion ongoing on the size of the detachment, Kersbergen was also unsure on the size of the contingent—twelve or twenty-four personnel—nor was he sure on the length of the deployment, as part of the list of demands included a minimum of six months in theatre for OMLTs.[112] This was initially opposed by the Dutch directorate of operations (DOPS) as this would portend that the deployments would be out of sync with the four-month cycle of the Dutch Battlegroups. With Stet only just in Uruzgan, no feedback loop had been established from Afghanistan to OMLT 2 concerning its tasks, utility and challenges. This implied that Kersbergen encountered the same obscurity regarding his tasks as Stet did.[113]

Eventually, Kersbergen received two separate mission statements. The first was to "prepare the Afghan army so that they are capable of independent operations, to the extent that they no longer need our assistance at all."[114] Secondly, whilst already in Afghanistan, Kersbergen was informed by the commanding officer of Regional Command South, Dutch two-star general Van Loon that "certification would be his utmost priority" during the upcoming

110 Interview Dutch TFU CO 98, 08/07/2020; Interview Dutch INF OMLT CO 73, 04/03/2020.

111 Interview Dutch INF OMLT CO 69, 09/03/2020.

112 NOTA C-OMLT aan C-MTC Kolmarns Swijgman: Knelpunten en Lessons Identified NLD OMLT-II, 28/06/2008.

113 Interview Dutch INF OMLT CO 69, 09/03/2020.

114 Ibid.

deployment. Informed by these intents, Kersbergen led OMLT 2 during its six-month rotation in 2006 and 2007.[115]

Kersbergen would meet most of his team at the OMLT field training exercise in Hohenfels. His team would constitute fifteen Royal Dutch Marines, complimented with eight Royal Army officers and NCOs.[116] His team was generally very experienced, as it included a number of late-entry officers and senior NCOs with already long operational careers. Like the first rotation, OMLT 2 had no higher echelon available to set the conditions for effective pre-deployment training, and so under Kersbergen's leadership, OMLT 2 set of to prepare its pre-deployment training themselves. The Hohenfels exercise provided OMLT 2 with an outline of the general OMLT tasks, and it also provided the team with the opportunity to get to know each other as, like the first OMLT, it was staffed in an ad hoc fashion.[117]

"You will do *anything* to get yourself certified," was the specific instruction of Major General Van Loon to Major Kersbergen. General Van Loon was the first Dutch general to command RC/S, and as such held responsibility for ISAF's activities in Uruzgan, Kandahar and Helmand during his six-month tenure from 1 November 2006 until 1 May 2007. Naturally, it was somewhat easier for Dutch officers to reach out to a Dutch general than either a British or Canadian officer. As the OMLT was still understaffed and underequipped relative to the ISAF benchmark, Kersbergen had little confidence that the DOPS would reinforce the OMLT on short notice with either personnel or equipment, Kersbergen decided that the certification had to be done through "grey area bookkeeping," as he called it, alternatively dubbed "the greatest lie ever told" by his team members.[118] In order to get certified, OMLT temporarily recruited JTACs, military nurses, drivers and gunners from the Battlegroup to present to the US staff during OMLT certification courses in Kabul and Kandahar.[119] Some of these staff would be appropriated by the OMLT permanently, as understaffing was still and issue.[120] Objecting Battlegroup officers, reluctant to detach personnel, were asked by Kersbergen to inform Major General Van Loon himself on the reasons why their objections would constitute a more important argument than the generals' direct orders. Indeed, at some point, the entire vehicle park of a Battlegroup mechanised company was presented as if it were OMLT assets to the US certification officers. Kersbergen ultimately was successful in attaining the certification, as by the end of January 2007, the Dutch OMLT got certified

115 Ibid.

116 Verslag werkbezoek CS MTC aan OMLT 2-3 te Hohenfels, 11–14 September 2006.

117 Leeuwenburg and Wiltenburg, *Met Geweer en Geduld*, 72.

118 Memorandum aan Kol TWB Vleugels, NLD-OMLT II Knelpunten validatie 03/01/2007; Interview Dutch mentor 112, 20/04/2020.

119 Interview Dutch mentor 112, 20/04/2020; Interview Dutch NCO mentor / instructor 42, 28/05/2020.

120 Interview Dutch mentor 113, 12/04/2020; Leeuwenburg and Wiltenburg, *Met Geweer en Geduld*, 74.

by ISAF. More importantly, the certification was permanent, so that not every subsequent rotation had to go through the same process.[121]

OMLT 2 reached an important milestone in becoming the first Dutch OMLT to be able to operate without US ETTs or ODAs. Moreover, utilising his more experienced staff, Kersbergen initiated the mentoring of the Afghan staff officers in the kandak, structuring the OMLT's training efforts and administration. With still few Afghan soldiers present in Tarin Kowt or Deh Rawood, independent operations were still rare, but patrols were now conducted together with the Battlegroup in a more structured fashion. In making an effort to adept the "Afghanisation" of the mission, more and more Battlegroup patrols included ANA/OMLT elements, and in March 2007 the first stand-alone ANA/OMLT/PRT patrol was conducted without a Battlegroup element.[122] This period also included the first operations in which the combined ANA and Battlegroup patrols exchanged fire with Taliban elements, sometimes leading to chaotic situations as the patrol's leadership had to deal with both the enemy as well as the ANA element, which did not necessarily react to fire as planned or agreed or ordered.[123]

As the Battlegroup stated its desire to have the Afghan forces on point in 'cordon and search' operations and patrolling the villages, the need to train up the ANA to the point that they were capable of executing basic infantry skills such as house clearing operations and covering movement with fire became apparent. OMLT 2 encountered difficulties in training the ANA to this level, as the Afghan soldiers often showed little coherence whilst under fire.[124] During Operation Koch, a cordon and search aiming to neutralise an identified Taliban hotspot, the ANA was ordered to breach the houses and search the compound whilst covered by the Battlegroup. Despite extensive tape drills and training efforts, the ANA was deemed not ready for such complex operations by its OMLT-trainers.[125] Pushed by TFU leadership as the commander of TFU 2, Colonel Van Griensven, wanted Afghans in first during house searches, the operation would proceed as planned.[126] Unfortunately, the lack of tactical proficiency showed as one ANA soldier was killed as he deviated from his drills and exposed himself to

121 NOTA P. Kersbergen aan C-MTC Kolmarns Swijgman, Knelpunten en Lessons Identified NLD-OMLT-II, 3.

122 Interview Dutch INF OMLT CO 69, 09/03/2020; OWD 070307; P. ter Velde, 188.

123 Interview Dutch NCO mentor / instructor 42, 28/05/2020.

124 Interview Dutch company commander 12, 16/06/2020; Interview Dutch NCO mentor / instructor 54, 25/06/2020; Interview Dutch INF OMLT CO 82, 02/04/2020 & 22/04/2020; Interview Dutch mentor 33, 06/04/2020; Interview Dutch TFU CO 59, 24/06/2020.

125 Interview Dutch mentor 112, 20/04/2020; Interview Dutch NCO mentor / instructor 42, 28/05/2020.

126 Powerpoint 'AAR Operation Koch' from SFTF Viper (unclass) 06/02/2007; 'AAR COM TFU', H. Van Griensven, Initial Commanders Assessment Operation Koch, (unclass) 12/02/2007.

enemy fire in the door opening. Another was wounded in the leg in the same incident.[127] Narrowly escaping casualties themselves, operation Koch showed the vulnerability of the OMLTs as its members had the dual task of guiding their trainees while covering their own positions as well. The trait of ANA soldiers to break with the drills and intended course of action on the moment supreme did lead to harsh criticism from both TFU leadership as well as the Dutch Special forces which were leading the operation. The Dutch SF commander even went as far as to state that he would decline to work with the ANA again, considering their bad level of soldiering during the operation.[128] The critical remarks on the ANA were seconded by many other Dutch OMLT members, who also voiced unfavourable remarks on the Afghan skill set.[129]

Despite the calamities during Operation Koch, the practice to have the ANA walking point, reminiscent of the criticised ODA/ETTs tactics during OMLT 1, became a regular feature in future house search operations and other patrols in urban areas. By the time OMLT 2 handed over to the OMLT 3 and left Afghanistan, they had been successful in having the Dutch OMLT certified, patrols were conducted both together with, as well as independent of, the Dutch Battlegroup and a huge administrative effort was made to galvanise the Afghan combat service support to the ANA brigade in Uruzgan. In May 2007, OMLT 2 handed over their responsibilities to the third OMLT rotation.

4.2.3 OMLT 3

In May 2007, OMLT was thus relieved by OMLT 3, led by Army Captain[130] Bossmann, the commanding officer of the elite Pathfinder platoon of 11 Air Assault Brigade. Bossmann had the advantage that he had first hand OMLT-experience in his platoon, as several of the Pathfinders had been a participant in OMLT 1. These NCOs would not return to Afghanistan for a second OMLT tour, so 11 AMB would have to staff OMLT 3 otherwise. As the Army was already heavily committed in Uruzgan, Dutch Army HQ expected the Dutch Marine Corps, which was mostly uncommitted to any operations, to provide the majority of the team. However, Marine leadership adhered to a former agreement of twelve Marines per OMLT, and Army HQ would not back down from an earlier statement that it could only provide eight out

127 Ivor Wiltenburg and Lysanne Leeuwenburg, *The Battle of Chora: A Military Operational Analysis of the 2007 Defence of the Chora District Centre in Uruzgan Province, Afghanistan* (War Studies Research Centre: NLDA Press, 2021), 34; Leeuwenburg and Wiltenburg, *Met Geweer en Geduld*, 80–84.

128 Powerpoint 'AAR Operation Koch' from SFTF Viper (unclass) 06/02/2007; 'AAR COM TFU', H. Van Griensven, Initial Commanders Assessment Operation Koch, (unclass) 12/02/2007.

129 Interview Dutch mentor 33, 06/04/2020; Interview Dutch mentor 84, 12/05/2020; Interview Dutch NCO mentor / instructor 42, 28/05/2020; Interview Dutch company commander 12, 16/06/2020.

130 Bossmann was promoted for the duration of the deployment, mostly because his Marine counterpart was a major and was to function as his executive officer.

of twelve personnel due to being stretched by the Uruzgan mission.[131] Although the Army's statements were an exaggeration, these petty interservice rivalry issues led to the sub-par staffing of OMLT 3, as only twenty out of the required twenty-four personnel were eventually assigned. Especially the Army component was understaffed, as two appointees were dropped during the pre-deployment phase due to unsuitability, leaving eighteen OMLT members.[132] Also, half of the Army detachment originated from other combat arms than the infantry, such as the cavalry (tanks) or the artillery. These servicemembers, although knowledgeable on tactics, lacked the small unit/close combat expertise that was expected from the OMLT.[133] A mid-term addition to the Army OMLT during this rotation was both unexpected as well as unwanted, and the newcomer was unable to cement his place in the team, as well as being considered redundant by the rest of the team.[134] The Marine component of OMLT 3 also experienced some issues in its staffing, as the Marines were drawn from the Surface Assault & Training Group in Texel, which main tasks do not include close combat operations, but rather supporting the Marine battalions with amphibious capacity, knowledge and training. Although all Dutch Marines have undergone the same basic training and are therefore considered capable infantrymen, ex post their deployment members of the Marine detachment did consider themselves rusty in their combat skills.[135] This view was seconded by the TFU leadership reflecting on the OMLT performance.[136]

All the above led to the commander of 11 AMB, Brigadier Marc van Uhm, to formally report to Army HQ that OMLT 3 was not to be considered operationally effective. He wrote in a formal note to the Commander of the Dutch Army, his older brother Lieutenant General Peter van Uhm, that the OMLT would be of limited operation capability:

> In the first place, OMLT does not consist of 24 persons. According to my information, CZSK[137] would provide 16 persons, and CLAS[138] 8 persons. For reasons unknown to me, CZSK only provided 12 service members. Of the 8 servicemembers provided by CLAS, 2 have been found unsuitable for deployment. Furthermore, I have rated two of the remaining 6 members as of limited capability for the OMLT as a result of their military

131 Brigadier General Evers, in an informal address to OMLT III (Army) members January 2008, Apeldoorn.

132 Interview Dutch INF OMLT CO 82, 02/04/2020 & 22/04/2020.

133 Nota Brigade General M. van Uhm; Notes taken during conversation between the G5 of 11 Brigade, and the senior officers of OMLT III.

134 Interview OMLT 3 focus group.

135 Interview Dutch NCO mentor / instructor 64, 08/04/2020; Interview Dutch NCO mentor / instructor 54, 25/06/2020.

136 Interview Dutch TFU CO 59, 24/06/2020.

137 Commando ZeeStrijdkrachten, Dutch military acronym for the Dutch Royal Navy.

138 Commando LandStrijdkrachten, Dutch military acronym for the Dutch Royal Army.

> background and experience. The commanding officer of OMLT-3 will have to assess on a case by case basis if participation to an assignment is a responsible course of action.

As this note was sent in carbon copy to the TFU-2 and -3 commanders, both were informed of the staffing issues of the OMLT 3.

The ad hoc staffing of the first three OMLTs led to tension amongst its members. Especially in OMLT-1 and -3, the respective commanding officers doubted the ability of parts of the team to function in combat.[139] Due to the brief interval between assignment and deployment, few OMLT-members were able to address these issues in additional training or education. Furthermore, the impromptu nature of the staffing process led to a mix of personnel from the services. Encountering institutional rivalry, authority and seniority issues as well as clashing personalities, the OMLT 3 team was divided over institutional lines. The short pre-deployment training proved to be insufficient to iron out tactical, personal or institutional differences. This was epitomised by the assessment from the American supervisor of the three-week OMLT training in Hohenfels when assessing OMLT 3:

> The current command structure of an Army captain as the Team Commander and a Marine Major as the second in command is a very difficult position for the officer in charge. Although this mission is an Army-led mission having a second in command that is of higher rank was obviously an issue. Even if the officers get along with each other and discuss this odd situation, there will undoubtedly be times where the second in command of higher rank will have issue with the decision of the Commander. This can lead to friction on the team that could cost the lives of soldiers.[140]

Besides the rank issues between the senior Army and Marine officers, the same appeared to be the case amongst the junior NCOs: "Also, with the difference in rank structure and time in service between the Army and Marines, there were times that older Marine Corporals did not want to listen to younger Army sergeants." The issues amongst the NCOs could be traced back to corporals in the Marines not being considered NCOs, whilst in the Army corporals would be considered junior enlisted personnel. In most cases, including the aforementioned rank disparities, a temporary promotion would be granted to the company grade officer or NCO.[141] Although this formally solved the problem, problems in relation to the chain of command would continue for OMLT 3 throughout the deployment.

139 Interview Dutch INF OMLT CO 73, 04/03/2020; Interview Dutch INF OMLT CO 82, 02/04/2020 & 22/04/2020.

140 William P. Brodany, Major US Army, Hohenfels 18/2/2007.

141 Interview Dutch INF OMLT CO 69, 09/03/2020; Interview Dutch INF OMLT XO 19, 10/06/2020.

Brodany continued his broadside on the divided OMLT 3 on other pressing issues:

> There were several issues with the integration of Army and Marine personnel. First we noticed that there were times that some of the Marines did not want to listen to the order and guidance of the Army soldiers. As an example, this also led to times where they did not want to perform simple tasks such as using proper individual movement techniques while under fire. The Army and Marine Corps definitely had different doctrine and techniques for accomplishing mission objectives and tasks. We noticed that the team did not have the time before their training at Hohenfels in which to train together as a unit and develop the Standard Operating Procedures in which to overcome these differences between the two services doctrine.[142]

The differences in doctrine, SOPs, operational background and rank structure as well as unresolved personal animosity before deployment did not only affect OMLT 3, but also had been an ongoing issue for the Dutch OMLT in the first three rotations.

Returning from Hohenfels training area, the senior officers of both the Army and the Marine detachment were summoned by the brigade G3 (operations) in order to mend relationships and attempt to come to a working solution. It was decided to follow the US advice and split up the team over service lines. To solve the rank issues, Bossmann would be temporarily promoted to major. Now divided into OMLT 3A and 3B, Bossmann decided to detach the Marines after arrival in Afghanistan to the ANA units in Kandahar and Deh Rawood, and base the Army OMLT team in Tarin Kowt, close to the TFU and BG HQ. With both senior officers split geographically, the Army and Marine OMLT detachment would eventually be able to function independently. Indeed, the entire chain of command was unclear to Bossmann during the pre-deployment period, so he was instructed by Brigadier General Marc van Uhm only to respect the orders of the commanding officer of the TFU himself.[143] With these directions in hand, Bossmann was able to position himself as a direct subsidiary of the TFU, in effect on the same level as the Battlegroup commander, the PRT and the Australian Reconstruction Taskforce (RTF). As Army HQ or the 11 AMB brigade considered their tasks limited to the formation and preparation of the OMLT, Bossmann received little instruction on the mission or expected end state of his deployment.[144] During the mission brief, in the paragraph concerning the execution of the mission, Bossmann found that he was to be involved in "training and train/accompany the ANA with all training and operational activities they put forth in the context of the cooperation with the Task Force and the Battlegroup."[145] As

142 William P. Brodany, Major US Army, Hohenfels 18/2/2007.

143 Nota on OMLT 3, 11 Brigade, private archive S. Bossmann

144 Operatiebevel nr 20 (Formering en gereedstelling Operational Mentor [sic] and Liaison Team 3 voor BG 3 en 4).

145 Ibid.

this left room for interpretation, Bossmann would have to present a more specific mission statement to his team.

Lacking both the numbers as well as the experience, Bossmann did not intend to build on OMLT 2's administrative efforts, much to the dismay of his predecessors. A natural combat leader, Bossmann intended to focus on independent platoon and company patrols by the ANA, thereby supporting the TFU counterinsurgency effort. The first Battlegroup commander had assessed that he would need fifteen platoons to conduct an effective counterinsurgency, but he only had the possession of twelve.[146] ANA platoons patrolling the area would represent a significant reinforcement of the COIN efforts.

Moreover, OMLT 3 was the first Dutch OMLT to have enough ANA troops present to actually participate in operations without continuous support from the Dutch Battlegroup. After repeated requests from the Battlegroup, the TFU and also the ANA themselves, the ANA battalion was reinforced with another full-sized company.[147] As Bossmann had been a small unit leader without any staff experience or even experience on company level, he was neither willing nor able to mentor the ANA kandak staff adequately. Indeed, the entire team was by far the most junior of the early OMLTs. As part of the OMLT assignment included mentoring ANA staff officers, Bossmann assigned junior company officers and NCOs to the Afghan kandak's section chiefs, which yielded little results and was quickly abandoned. Recognising that 'mentoring' Afghan officers and NCOs on the kandak-level would not constitute to a fruitful mission, Bossmann resorted to aggressive patrolling outside of the wire, which was more in his comfort zone, and warranted given the growing pressure from the Taliban in Uruzgan.[148]

Coincidentally, OMLT 3A would be part of two watershed moment for the Dutch Armed forces. The Chora district in Uruzgan province was visited regularly by Dutch patrols, but after Taliban forces attacked and occupied one of the Afghan National Police posts in the district on 26 April 2007, Dutch commanders decided to post a permanent presence in Chora. However, this decision necessitated the Battlegroup to occupy the main bases in Tarin Kowt and Deh Rawood, as well as the patrol bases Poentjak north of Tarin Kowt and Volendam near Deh Rawood. The patrol bases were resulting from the Dutch attempt to emulate the British platoon house strategy in Helmand; however, like the British in 2006, it left the Battlegroup stretched. As the Taliban pressure on the Chora district did not relent, the TFU commander, pressed for a decision by the company commander in Chora, decided to stay

146 Sar, "Kick the Enemy Where It Hurts Most," 10–17.

147 Interview Dutch INF OMLT CO 82, 02/04/2020; 22/04/2020; Interview Dutch Army officer 135, 07/05/2021.

148 Leeuwenburg and Wiltenburg, *Met Geweer en Geduld*, 97.

and fight.[149] At this time, it was unclear how many Taliban were opposing the Battlegroup platoons in Chora, but estimations ranged from 150 to 1,000. By ordering all his available troops to Chora, TFU commander Van Griensven hoped to counter the Taliban's attack on Chora. Via local power brokers, the TFU also managed to reinforce the Battlegroup with a local militia, led by future Chora district chief Rozi Khan. Besides the Dutch and Rozi Khan's militia, the ANA was also asked to reinforce Chora. Already, one ANA platoon was present, which was supported by three OMLT members. A CH-47 helicopter carried another sixty ANA and three OMLT members from Tarin Kowt to Chora in the early morning of 17 June.

The following morning, in a battalion-sized manoeuvre, the Afghan/Dutch forces cleared the eastern Baluchi Valley from Taliban presence, albeit in a rather anticlimactic fashion, as very little opposition was encountered. During the manoeuvre, the ANA/OMLT was ordered to advance over the central axis through the green zone, the lush green area irrigated by the river running through the valley.[150] As the Dutch forces advanced on the high ground and—contrary to the ANA/OMLT—were supported by combat support and combat service support elements, the OMLT were cross with the decision to have them advance unsupported over arguably the most dangerous axis.[151] Indeed, the OMLT regularly had to oppose Dutch officers who proposed to have the ANA driving or walking point, with the Battle of Chora a case in point. This observation was corroborated by several interviewees of the early OMLTs.[152]

As for the events in June 2007, they were presented as the "Battle of Chora" by the Dutch Army, and as such a great military victory against the Taliban in Dutch national media. Through a series of roadshows on the major barracks in the Netherlands, the chain of events was also disseminated to the Dutch Army. Some merit could be given to this classification, given the fighting between of 15–18 June, especially when viewed through the lens of a COIN campaign rather than a regular conflict. The role of the OMLT and the ANA was understated during the roadshows, again causing some ire amongst the OMLT participants, although this was corrected several years after the Battle of Chora as all OMLT 3A members received a distinction from the Army.

149 The Battle of Chora has been the subject of an Occasional Paper by the War Studies Research Centre, conducted by the author of this dissertation. For a full report on the Battle of Chora, see: Wiltenburg and Leeuwenburg, *The Battle of Chora: A Military Operational Analysis of the 2007 Defence of the Chora District Centre in Uruzgan Province, Afghanistan*; Ivor Wiltenburg, Lysanne Leeuwenburg, and Martijn van der Vorm, "De Slag om Chora deel 1: Een Reconstructie van de Junidagen in 2007," *Militaire Spectator* (2022).

150 Wiltenburg and Leeuwenburg, *The Battle of Chora*, 12–13.

151 Interview Dutch INF OMLT CO 82, 02/04/2020 & 22/04/2020; Interview Dutch mentor 16, 28/05/2020; Interview Dutch mentor 84, 12/05/2020; Interview Dutch mentor 11, 30/03/2020; Interview Dutch mentor 27, 11/ 06/2020.

152 Interview Dutch mentor 84, 12/05/2020; Leeuwenburg and Wiltenburg, *Met Geweer en Geduld*, 91.

Shortly afterwards, the operation became contentious. Dutch forces were accused of violating international humanitarian law, as well as ISAF's rules of engagement (ROE), starting with a report by the US commander of the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF), primarily focusing on the (visually) unobserved use of ground-based fire support in populated areas in the Baluchi valley. Since then, several investigations have been launched to assess the legality of the Dutch reaction. Ultimately, the public prosecutor in the Netherlands concluded that International Humanitarian Law and the Rules of Engagement had been respected.[153] Another consequence of the Battle of Chora was that as this was the first battalion-sized manoeuvre performed by the Dutch Army in decades, it became a benchmark for every ensuing Battlegroup rotation, which invariably emulated Battlegroup 3 in executing a battalion-sized manoeuvre, often resulting in an additional patrol base or combat outpost within the Uruzgan borders.

The second watershed moment involving OMLT 3A was a rather minor skirmish in September 2007. An ANA/OMLT patrol was engaged in a firefight with Taliban insurgents. Coincidentally, a combat photographer had joined the patrol, and his footage was presented to a Dutch journalist present in Tarin Kowt. On 3 October, the Dutch public was confronted with the realities of the counterinsurgency in Uruzgan during at the eight o'clock journal on national television. As the Dutch cabinet had attempted to present the Uruzgan deployment as a *wederopbouwmissie*, a reconstructive effort aiming to rebuild Afghanistan, the footage of Dutch and Afghan forces exchanging fire and being supported by US air support caused consternation. Although the Battle of Chora had already shown the Dutch public that fighting was part of the mission, the televised fighting of the OMLT and the ANA reaffirmed the shift from a benign reconstructive mission to a hard-fought counterinsurgency.

The OMLT 3B team had settled at Camp Tycz near Deh Rawood, where it started to build rapport with the ANA. Again, close cooperation was maintained between the US ETTs and the Dutch OMLT. Unlike the Army OMLT, the Marines could operate in a relatively benign environment, as no troops-in-contact situations occurred during the first few months. However, at the end of August 2007, the security situation in Deh Rawood deteriorated. During a patrol near the town of Pay Chowtu, the OMLT/ANA patrol was engaged with small-arms fire. As the OMLT/ANA were disengaging, one Afghan soldier was hit in the upper leg,

153 See: AIHRC and UNAMA joint investigation into the civilian deaths caused by the ISAF operation in response to a Taliban attack in Chora district, Uruzgan on 16 June 2007; Openbaar Ministerie: "Geweldsaanwending Chora rechtmatig" (persbericht, 30 June 2008); Human Rights Watch, "Troops in Contact: Airstrikes and Civilian Deaths in Afghanistan" (8 September 2008); Afghanistan Independent Human Rights Commission/United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan. Note: In 2023, a Dutch court judged the engagement of an Afghan Quala to be 'unlawul'. See: https://www.prakkendoliveira.nl/en/news/2022/dutch-bombing-of-quala-during-battle-for-chora-deemed-unlawful accessed 05/05/2023

and first aid had to be administered by the OMLT whilst still under fire. The OMLT also called in a MEDEVAC helicopter to evacuate the wounded ANA soldier.[154]

The infiltration by Taliban forces into the countryside near Deh Rawood in late 2008 led to frequent exchanges of fire between the Battlegroup and the insurgents. As Taliban pressure increased, Afghan police posts near Chutu and Dizak, located on the westbank of the Helmand River, were either overrun or withdrawn from by the ANSF. The furlough of the OMLT coincided with the increased Taliban pressure, and subsequently understaffing, as Dutch service members are allowed leave during a six-month deployment. As the ANA patrols had to be supervised, Marines were transferred from Kandahar to Deh Rawood. During an ODA-led patrol, the ANA was again put forward to clear houses. The two Marines who were attached to the ANA platoon witnessed an "excess of firepower and air assets which laid the foundation for the ANA to go forward, however with minimal support from the ODA." Again, the cooperation between the OEF, ISAF and Afghan forces provided the OMLT with a dilemma, but like the Dutch Special Forces, the solution was eventually found in that the Dutch would operate "in support of coalition partners," which provided a legal loophole to formally separate the ISAF and OEF actions.[155]

A few days later, in late September 2007, OMLT 3B found itself again under enemy fire whilst patrolling together with the ODA and ANA. A small convoy consisting of four American Humvees and five Ford Rangers with twenty-four Afghan soldiers moved towards Kakrak Hill, north of Deh Rawood. The US Special Forces had an AC-130 gunship available, which was used pre-emptively on several locations before the ANA/OMLT combination was moved towards qualas where Taliban forces are expected. Although no insurgents were found, the Marines were engaged later that day. Again, the AC-130 was used to repel the Taliban forces, albeit this time the Dutch Marines pointed out the targets as the American JTAC had no eyes on target. Eventually, the patrol withdrew to a Dutch patrol base in Deh Rawood, called Volendam. As a result of the volume of firepower which was put down on targets by the American Special Forces, questions were asked by the Dutch parliament.[156] The Dutch Minister of Defence informed Parliament that possibly more than sixty Afghan civilians were killed as a result of ANA operations on 25 and 26 September 2007. As the ANA had neither air assets nor JTACs, this statement is a fallacy. Indeed, this research indicates that the air assets used to engage targets during the patrols on 25 and 26 September were ODA-controlled

154 Interview Dutch INF OMLT XO 46, 14/05/2020 & 08/06/2020; Interview Dutch mentor 36, 27/05/2020; Leeuwenburg and Wiltenburg, *Met Geweer en Geduld*, 122–23.

155 Arthur ten Cate and Martijn van der Vorm, *Callsign Nassau: het moderne Korps Commandotroepen 1989–2012* (Boom, 2012), 244.

156 Tweede Kamer der Staten-Generaal, "Aanhangsel van de Handelingen," 2 December 2010, https://zoek.officielebekendmakingen.nl/ah-tk-20102011-662.html.

American air assets.[157] This observation is particular, as the fierce reaction of Parliament on the Dutch use of air and fire support which caused civilian casualties during the Battle of Chora was disproportionate to the rather resigned response on this similar case. As it were, the Dutch (mostly OMLT) involvement was downplayed by the Ministry of Defence, and no further action was taken.

With pressure on Deh Rawood, the TFU, under new leadership as Colonel Nico Geerts had taken over from Van Griensven, executed operation Spin Ghar, a large operation including Dutch, American, Australian and Afghan forces. The aim of the operation was to *clear* the Baluchi Valley (again), and subsequently leave a permanent presence near the Baluchi Valley entrance. To this end, the RC/S reserve, a company of the British Royal Ghurka Rifles, was attached to the Task Force Uruzgan. As OMLT 3A (Army) joined forces with the ANA to support both the Dutch and British companies, the Marines in Deh Rawood participated in a four-day patrol near the Mian Do. The complexity of mentoring the ANA again showed as "the OMLT had to fight, mark the targets for the Battlegroup, and lead the ANA."[158] Although the OMLT did not suffer any casualties, some frustration could be observed in the latter stages of the deployment. A journalist who wanted to join an OMLT/ANA patrol was rebuffed with the remark of a unit commander that he "already had 100 people to babysit," and as such had little opportunity to offer protection to the reporters.[159] An ANA NCO who had joined the Army component managed to shoot himself in the foot as the was toying with his weapon, bemusing although not surprising the OMLT members.[160]

As OMLT 3 entered the final weeks of its deployment, a large increase of the ANA in Uruzgan had been planned since September 2007. As the OMLT teams in Tarin Kowt and Deh Rawood had mostly focused on the patrolling and mentoring at hand, the decision to station an Afghan Brigade in Uruzgan had gone by mostly unnoticed. The Marines in Kandahar, however, had been very busy preparing a large convoy from Kandahar Airfield towards Tarin Kowt. This convoy would constitute most of the (American made) vehicles of the 4th ANA Brigade and its personnel. This project was commanded by Colonel Teun Baartman, an old school artillery officer who had assigned himself—he worked at the directorate of operations of the Army—to set up a Brigade OMLT. To this end, several officers had visited OMLT 3 to reconnoitre the locations at Tarin Kowt and Deh Rawood. At this time, little was left of the original OMLT 3 structures. The Army OMLT was by now only four strong, as two Army NCOs had left Uruzgan

157 Tweede Kamer der Staten-Generaal 2 Vergaderjaar 2007–2008 Aanhangsel van de Handelingen https://zoek.officielebekendmakingen.nl/ah-tk-20072008-852.html accessed 01/07/2022; Leeuwenburg and Wiltenburg, *Met Geweer en Geduld*, 123–27.

158 Leeuwenburg and Wiltenburg, *Met Geweer en Geduld*, 127.

159 Interview Dutch mentor 36, 27/05/2020.

160 Interview Dutch INF OMLT CO 82, 02/04/2020 & 22/04/2020; Interview Dutch mentor 16, 28/05/2020.

for personal reasons, and were now supported by around ten Cavalry NCOs (reconnaissance regiment). OMLT 3A had incorporated part-timers during most of its tenure, as the small team was chronically understaffed. These part-timers included the Colonel's driver, a combat photographer and the aforementioned reconnaissance staff. The Marines were tasked to come over to Tarin Kowt, and were subsequently moved forward to the Poentjak patrol base. Lastly, the Marines who were working in Kandahar joined the rest of the team in Tarin Kowt as they had joined the 4th Brigade convoy.

Baartman was less than impressed by this motley crew of OMLT members. He lamented the OMLT 3's lack of discipline, and considered them to have 'gone native.' Bossmann was equally unimpressed, as formally OMLT 3 had not been positioned within Baartman's chain of command. Indeed, the fact that the OMLT formally reported to neither the TFU or the Battlegroup, and the ANA neither had any command relationship with either the TFU or the OMLT, was a continuing source of friction.[161] Eventually, OMLT 3A redeployed back to the Netherlands late in November, with OMLT 3B staying a couple of weeks longer to ensure that the transition between the new kandak OMLT, who had not yet arrived, and the incumbent OMLT went smoothly. The reconnaissance troop also joined the OMLT for a few more weeks to assist in the transition. As OMLT 3 left Afghanistan, Baartman restructured the OMLT effort along the ANA brigade line, and seventy officers and NCOs had been ordered to staff the OMLT—both the Brigade as well as the kandaks—a more structured unit was now in place. Also, the rank of the OMLT commander, a full Colonel, put him on equal rank with the TFU commander, albeit that the latter would of course stay in charge of the overall operation. Still, the appointment of a Colonel to head the OMLT indicated the increased effort the Dutch Armed forces were making to increase the ANA's potential.

4.2.4 OMLT 4

On 31 July 2007, the NATO Joint Analysis and Lessons Learned Centre (JALLC) in Portugal, presented a report on the effectiveness of ISAF's OMLTs.[162] Its most important observations included that the OMLT structure did not match the ANA brigades,' and that the age and rank differences between the mentors and mentees impacted the functional relationships. Moreover, the relatively short period of deployment (four to six months for most OMLTs, six in the case of the Netherlands during this period) did not match the ANA's nine-month colour scheme. Lastly, the national caveats of the participating nations had a negative impact on the continuation of mentoring, even in the event of cross-border operations (provincial). This research could not find any indication that the JALLC report had found its way into the Netherlands' Ministry of Defence, although a few adaptations had already been made in a parallel learning loop. The new Dutch brigade OMLT thus resembled the ANA brigade when

161 See: Wiltenburg and Leeuwenburg, *The Battle of Chora*, 57.

162 "OMLTs in ISAF: Effectiveness and Efficiency of the Operational Mentoring and Liaison Team in ISAF," JALLC, 31/07/2007, 4.

it arrived in Afghanistan in September 2007, and an attempt was made to match the rank of the mentee more evenly, as the brigade OMLT had a substantial number of field grade officers in its ranks.

Although Colonel Baartman had been responsible for setting up the Brigade OMLT, and he enabled the arrival of the 4th ANA OMLT in Uruzgan province, he was quickly relieved by Colonel Rob Sondag as the Brigade OMLT's preparatory phase had been concluded. Under the Brigade OMLT, two infantry kandak OMLTs would be positioned, one staffed by the Royal Dutch Marines, and one by the Royal Dutch Army. The previous rotation had been reformed over service lines due to friction during the mission's pre-deployment training, however in this case this was a result of mission design. The Army OMLT, OMLT 4A, was for the first time formed by a singular unit.[163] 43 Brigade Reconnaissance Squadron (43 BVE), part of 43 Mechanised Brigade, was according to several of its officers selected to replace the Dutch Special Forces detachment 'Viper,' which would leave Afghanistan to enjoy an operational pause in December 2007 and would not return to Uruzgan until 2009, eighteen months later.[164] Although 43 BVE is by no means a special forces unit, it was assessed that its reconnaissance expertise could partially fulfil the special reconnaissance operations as conducted by the Dutch SF.[165] In the summer of 2007, the squadron was retasked to function as an OMLT. Unfortunately, the rationale behind the withdrawal of the special forces capacity could not be retrieved by this research. Still, 43 BVE benefitted from a coherent and prolonged preparatory phase before deploying to Uruzgan. Also, the BVE had a OMLT 2 mentor within its ranks, and one of the officers of OMLT 3A, made the effort to brief the BVE during his leave, so a proper understanding of the situation could be developed through these informal lines.

The commanding officer, Major Gorissen, split the team into six mentor teams consisting of three persons and a small staff, totalling twenty-four personnel. In a conventional conflict, 43 BE would operate in teams of six persons, but considering the many different locations where the ANA was already present, smaller teams seamed more feasible.[166] The shift from six to three persons enabled the BVE to participate in more patrols and be more redundant, albeit at the cost of sustainability.

163 See: OMLT 4A Herinneringsboek.

164 Ten Cate and van der Vorm, *Callsign Nassau: het moderne Korps Commandotroepen 1989–2012*, 183.

165 Interview Dutch INF OMLT CO 25, 23/09/2020; Interview Dutch NCO mentor / instructor 58, 16/12/2020 & 14/04/2021; Interview Dutch company mentor 83, 23/07/2020 & 08/03/2021.

166 Interview Dutch INF OMLT CO 25, 23/09/2020; Interview Dutch INF OMLT XO 68, 17/08/2020; Leeuwenburg and Wiltenburg, *Met Geweer en Geduld*, 182.

The OMLT 4B team, in contrast, was again a result of a trawl across the Royal Dutch Marine subunits, which yielded twenty-four OMLT members under the leadership of a Marines captain who would be promoted to major for the duration of the deployment. As the trawl resulted in a quantitatively well-staffed unit, the plethora of different personalities and capabilities resulted in discord amongst the Marines.[167] One responded stated that OMLT 4B was "constructed from the periphery of the Marine Corps," while another mentioned that the OMLT was staffed "from all over the Marine Corps."[168] The commanding officer was unable to enforce his authority, and his leadership was formally questioned by his subordinates. This resulted in higher-echelon Marine leadership to appoint a Marine Captain as a 'tactical commander,' with the major de facto reduced to a position of symbolic leadership.[169] Apparently, the Royal Marines were either unwilling or unable to replace the CO by an officer with more authority, resulting in this rather unconventional solution. Moreover, multiple respondents mentioned the rather toxic environment within the OMLT 4B team, which abated somewhat as the five three-man teams were dispersed over the different locations in Uruzgan province.[170]

The OMLT 4B team started operations shortly after arriving in Deh Rawood. Three Battlegroup platoons were stationed at Camp Hadrian, while a third manned patrol base Volendam. Joint patrolling was initially conducted in the Deh Rawood district centre and the area south of the Tiri Rud River. Later the patrolling was moved north, which was less permissive and resulted in the first troops in contact situations for the ANA/OMLT unit. A second incident occurred as the ANA and OMLT were supporting a Battlegroup effort to build a bridge between the patrol base Volendam and a feature called 'Cemetery Hill-North.' During the construction of the bridge, the Dutch engineers and Afghans were engaged repeatedly, which resulted in the death of anV ANA lieutenant. His demise was a blow to morale, as the Marines had recognised the military skill of this particular officer, despite the disparaging remarks that were so common about the average skills of the Afghan soldiers. This chain of events marked the end of OMLT 4B efforts in Deh Rawood, as the 4A detachment was by now arriving at Camp Hadrian.

OMLT 4A arrived a month after 4B in Uruzgan, resulting in a temporary situation that all battalion and company mentoring was performed by Marines (most were part of the 4A team, but its predecessors from OMLT 3, the Marine's 3B team was also still in theatre supporting

167 Interview Dutch tactical CO / advisor 7, 21/08/2020; Interview Dutch mentor 80, 20/01/2020; Interview Dutch NCO mentor/ instructor 62, 22/09/2020; Interview Dutch NCO mentor / instructor 49, 27/10/2020; Interview Dutch mentor 136, 03/09/2020.

168 Interview Dutch NCO mentor / instructor 62, 22/09/2020; Interview Dutch mentor 80, 20/01/2020.

169 Interview Dutch mentor 80, 20/01/2020, Interview Dutch tactical CO / advisor 7, 21/08/2020.

170 Interview Dutch NCO mentor / instructor 62, 22/09/2020; Interview Dutch mentor 80, 20/01/2020.

the ANA as they had not yet returned to the Netherlands). Upon the arrival of OMLT 4A, Colonel Sondag decided to concentrate the Marines in the Tarin Kowt area, with the Army focusing on Deh Rawood. This decision was opposed by the Marines, as they had spent the last month building rapport with the ANA, had patrolled the Deh Rawood area and were by now knowledgeable about the area and its inhabitants.[171] Moreover, the Marines had issues with the (unfounded) prospect of being restricted to base duties at Kamp Holland.[172]

Meanwhile, the interservice infighting continued as OMLT 4B was accused of appropriating the equipment belonging to 4A, which was possible because the Army detachment arrived somewhat later than its Marine counterparts. This conflict escalated to TFU-level, leading to a formal investigation by the TFU-staff.[173] The interservice squabbles overshadowed the objectives of the OMLT-mission, and continued as the Marine detachment were ordered back from Deh Rawood to Tarin Kowt.

The switch between the teams was completed shortly before a sizeable operation was due in the larger Deh Rawood area. The criticism by the Marine detachment thus held some merit, as the new OMLT would have to work with Afghan soldiers that were by and large strangers to the detachment. The initial assessment by the Army OMLT of the ANA capabilities in Deh Rawood were also rather dire, with one NCO observing that the soldier skills of the ANA were "comparable to Miffy's."[174] On 12 January 2008, operation Kapcha As commenced, with two Battlegroup companies being reinforced with an (OMLT complemented) ANA detachment. Although the initial plan was to conduct a combat reconnaissance from the north towards the south in the Deh Rawood area, the commanding officer of the Battlegroup decided to switch the direction of march 180 degrees. This decision was vehemently opposed by the Battlegroup staff, the company commanders and the OMLT; however, the CO decided to stay with his decision. This left the OMLT with an unprepared assignment with fresh, ill-equipped ANA troops. "The [ANA] soldiers carried a rifle, but that was it. They did not have additional magazines, no bulletproof vests, almost nobody wore a helmet," according to an OMLT NCO.[175]

The first contact with the Taliban during this operation occurred shortly after the operation started on 12 January. Although no casualties were sustained, "the Afghan soldiers fired on everything that moved. One of our team tried to have an Afghan soldier to fire his RPG on a certain quala, but he managed to fire in the wrong direction twice, despite the target being

171 Personal diary Dutch mentor 136.

172 Ibid.

173 Interview Dutch mentor S4, 03/11/2020; Leeuwenburg and Wiltenburg, *Met Geweer en Geduld*, 184–85.

174 Leeuwenburg and Wiltenburg, *Met Geweer en Geduld*, 186.

175 Ibid., 187.

only a short distance away."[176] The OMLT responded to the ANA inaptitude by pre-deploying the ANA infantry groups, and marching them under OMLT control towards the target area, which was a common technique amongst the previous OMLTs. De facto under the command of the OMLT, the ANA did perform admirably at times, even using fire to support a manoeuvre and subsequently clearing a large quala complex. With dusk approaching, the Battlegroup commander decided to go firm for the night. During the night, a series of tactical deficiencies on all levels—Battlegroup, company, platoon, squad and individual—contributed to misconceptions on all levels which had serious repercussions during the night. As one company had progressed further than the other, the subunits went firm unaligned. Although this might be resolved by strict application of sector division, errors were made during the operation. Conflicting reports on enemy movements eventually led to a blue-on-blue incident in which three Dutch soldiers were hit by cannon fire from a Dutch YPR infantry fighting vehicle. The OMLT present at this location were able to retrieve the wounded soldiers to a safer location and administer first aid. Despite these efforts, two Dutch soldiers died from their wounds, with the third sustaining serious injuries to his lower extremities.

On the other axis, the OMLT and Battlegroup soldiers were on high alert as a result from the shooting, and the troop expected the Taliban to be in close proximity to the Dutch positions. Two ANA soldiers—unrecognisable as they had covered themselves with blankets during the cold night—were mistakenly identified as Taliban fighters and killed by an OMLT member and a Battlegroup marksman.[177] By now, Operation Kapcha As had claimed the lives of four soldiers by friendly fire, and seriously injured a fifth. As dawn lifted the fog of war, the TFU commander ordered the operation to be cancelled, much to the dismay of the ANA, who considered withdrawal to be dishonourable. Colonel Sondag later informed the ANA Brigade commander on the death of two of his soldiers, and although the Dutch were forthcoming on the cause of their deaths, the general accepted this as a consequence of war, and was quick to resume his daily routine afterwards.

Operation Kapcha As was intended as the preceding manoeuvre of a larger clearing operation, dubbed Pathan Ghar. Notwithstanding the disastrous outcome of Kapcha As, the new TFU commander's intent—Colonel Geerts was succeeded by Colonel Richard van Harskamp—had remained unchanged with regards to Pathan Ghar. In between these operations, the OMLT was tasked to train up a kandak in Tarin Kowt to support the Battlegroup. However, the American special forces in Deh Rawood, working under the OEF mandate, utilised the

176 Interview Dutch NCO mentor / instructor 47, 07/09/2020.

177 Official report Kapcha As, retrieved from TFU archives; Leeuwenburg and Wiltenburg, *Met geweer en Geduld*, 185–95; interview OMLT 4A focus group.

gap between these operations to clear the area in the north of Deh Rawood autonomously.[178] Unsupported by the OMLT, the ODA, together with thirty-five ANA soldiers and 200 militiamen of the Kandak-e-Amniant-e Uruzgan (KAU) moved through the north Deh Rawood area, generously utilising American air and fire support. The KAU was a militia led by Matiullah Khan, a nephew of local power broker Jan Mohammed Khan, who the Dutch had decided to shun due to his unsavoury humanitarian and legal record. The US had no such qualms, and the resulting clearing led Pathan Ghar to be a rather benevolent operation, as most opposing forces had chosen to withdraw for the time being.[179] Also, the TFU, supported by the ISAF reserve battalion known as Task Force Fury, constituted to ascendancy that the Taliban resorted to its common modus operandi and dissolved into the population.[180] Pathan Ghar did little to attrite the Taliban; however, the opposition's absence allowed the TFU to establish yet another four combat outposts c.q. patrol bases, which would, in part, be occupied by the ANA and its mentoring teams on the Westbank of the Helmand river.

In the Tarin Kowt area, the last sizeable operation, Operation Spin Ghar in late 2007, had also resulted in the construction of a few new patrol bases. Patrol base Mirwais was now the new ANA base camp, located a few hundred metres from the White Compound, the government building in the village of Ali Shirzai in the Chora district. In the Tarin Kowt bowl, patrol bases Buman and Kyber were constructed and required occupation. This was bestowed largely on the ANA, who together with their mentors resided in these bases from December 2007 onward. Patrol base Khyber would be the first base without any Battlegroup presence, relying solely on local forces and the OMLT. Although the construction of the bases could be presented as 'increasing the ink blot' to national politicians and general ISAF officers, the conditions were far from ideal for its occupants. The OMLT reported that "we had not received a mission statement before going to Khyber, so we formulated one on our own: charting the territory and clear the area from enemy activity."[181] Another OMLT member added: "we wanted to go out and hunt, kill the enemy and apprehend the Taliban so that the locals could live in peace."[182] Although this restated mission was not by any means a derivative of ISAF's intent with regard to the OMLT, the positioning of a small OMLT detachment with a platoon of Afghan soldiers without a clear mission statement from either the Brigade OMLT or the TFU almost naturally resulted in grassroot initiatives being undertaken. The first concerns, however, were focused on improving the poor defences of the patrol base, as the Australian engineers left well before the project was finished. Moreover, although the OMLT Marines were rather enthusiastic of the opportunity to establish their own fiefdom at Khyber, they

178 Kitzen, *The Course of Co-option*, 435.

179 Kitzen, *The Course of Co-option*, 441–42.

180 Leeuwenburg and Wiltenburg, *Met Geweer en Geduld*, 195–97.

181 Ibid., 219.

182 Interview Dutch NCO mentor / instructor 49, 27/10/2020.

would have to do without combat support or combat service support, as no mortars, combat medics, search capacity or forward observers were present at the outpost.[183] Colonel Sondag stated that the "Afghan Army was only of any importance when it was to the TFU's benefit, and it occurred regularly that the TFU forgot that Dutch personnel was also present on the outposts."[184] The situation led to demotivated ANA personnel and frustrated Dutch OMLT staff. The standing rule was that medical support was essential when operating outside of the wire, and in the absence of any combat medics, the Dutch OMLT detachment had to step over this line habitually in order to accompany the ANA on patrols. As it happened, the OMLT had to make do, as only at the end of the OMLT 4 term any substantial improvements were made to the patrol base. The ANA/OMLT presence presented the Taliban with a target of opportunity: IEDs were regularly found during patrols, and the base was with some regularity fired upon from the green zone 150 m from the patrol base. Lastly, the OMLT had to deal with tribal unrest within the ANA, which in one case resulted in the Afghan soldiers discharging their weapons on each other, with the OMLT unable to intervene.[185] Friction between Afghans of different tribal backgrounds was also a recurring issue for the OMLTs.[186]

The expanding number of locations had its effect on the OMLT, as rotating was increasingly difficult. On some locations, OMLT members would stay for as many as six weeks before rotating to Camp Holland, and the austere conditions on the patrol bases had its effect on the OMLT teams and the ANA. A proposal from the Brigade OMLT staff to decrease the number of mentors per location to two was quickly abandoned after criticism from the practitioners. In a sprint towards the finish, the Marines made the effort to fully commit themselves to the outposts until OMLT 4 was relieved in place by the fifth rotation.

4.2.5 OMLT 5

In many ways, the fifth OMLT rotation was a carbon copy of OMLT 4. Again, the OMLT consisted of a Royal Dutch Marine detachment and an Army detachment. The latter was again staffed by 43 BVE, as the unit was large enough to staff two subsequent rotations. The Marines were selected from 2 Mariniersbataljon (2 MARNS), resulting in the first instance that the Dutch armed forces staffed the OMLT by selecting from a standing unit, instead of trawling from the periphery of the organisation. Moreover, the pre-deployment training was performed collectively, positively adding to the unit coherence. The Marines' infantry skills rubbed off

183 Leeuwenburg and Wiltenburg, *Met Geweer en Geduld*, 219; Interview Dutch mentor 137, 02/02/2021.

184 Interview Dutch OMLT BDE CO 76, 02/09/2020.

185 Leeuwenburg and Wiltenburg, *Met Geweer en Geduld*, 224.

186 Ibid. 224.

on the reconnaissance squadron, and the Marines were able to acquaint themselves with the Army's radio systems and procedures.[187]

However, this did not mean that the preparations were a smooth endeavour. One of the officers of the rotation noted that "despite being the fifth rotation, we still felt that no higher echelon took responsibility to staff and train the OMLTs. We had to take care of our own business, which clashed with Army procedures as we were not authorised to train with certain weapon systems."[188] The CO added that he was frequently reminded that the OMLT was "only in an advisory role," and thus the OMLT did have little rights to claim scarce resources and training facilities, best reserved for combat troops.[189]

Also, the communication between the OMLT 4A and its successors had some room for improvement. The decision to switch to three-person mentor teams had not been passed to the fifth rotation, probably due to a technical issue on the secure computer system, but it still resulted in a late adjustment to tactics and techniques for OMLT 5. The reports coming in from OMLT also detailed the combat scenarios as described in this chapter. However, the situation in Uruzgan had since calmed down significantly, leading to a degree of cognitive dissonance as OMLT prepared for combat but instead found the situation in Uruzgan upon arrival to be rather peaceful.[190]

As OMLT 5A (Army) settled in Deh Rawood, the unit was informed that it would have to leave Firebase Tycz. The US Special Forces' base had been the home of the Dutch OMLT since 2006, but the arrival of an additional American police mentoring team meant that the OMLT drawn from the Brigade Reconnaissance Squadron (BVE) had to make way for the Americans. The Dutch themselves contemplated that the arrival of a new ODA—the international relations had always been very strong in Deh Rawood, but the new ODA was rather reticent towards the Dutch—had more to do with the request to leave Tycz. "We always had liaised between the ANA and the ODA,"[191] was the assessment of one of the OMLT officers. "However, the new ODA rather bypassed the Dutch OMLT to do business with the ANA themselves." The integration of the Dutch OMLT with the US ODA had added to the status aparte of the mentors in Deh

187 As a result of the Dutch Marine Corps integration with the British Royal Marine Commandos, the Royal Dutch Marines are better equipped for integrated operations with the British Marines than the Dutch Army. This discrepancy is more detail in Leeuwenburg and Wiltenburg, *Met Geweer en Geduld*, 94–95.

188 Interview Dutch INF OMLT XO 68, 17/08/2020.

189 Interview Dutch INF OMLT CO 26 09/09/2020.

190 Leeuwenburg and Wiltenburg, *Met Geweer en Geduld*, 238–40.

191 This statement is actually not true, as the American ODAs were in direct contact with the ANA in 2006 and 2007, and only later gave the OMLT some leeway in the communication with the ANA; Sitrep B OMLT 2008/05/17, Interview Dutch mentor S4 65, 03/11/2020.

Rawood, and the services on the American camp were far better than in Camp Hadrian. Also, the cramped Dutch camp had little room to spare for the OMLT, although eventually some room was found, which was sufficient on the condition that at least part of the OMLT was present on one of the outposts. The lack of belonging to the TFU or Battlegroup was common amongst the OMLT rotations, and the forced move from Tycz resulted in one of the interviewees to comment that "the most intense fighting we have done during our tour was always internally, with the Battlegroup staff officers who were safe on a camp."[192]

The uneventful 5A rotation resulted in unopposed patrolling, as well as the opportunity to train and school the Afghan soldiers in soldier skills and military decision-making processes. This yielded results as one NCO witnessed an Afghan sergeant presenting an orders brief on his own initiative, which had not been observed earlier in the tour. Indeed, much effort was put into leadership and military decision-making processes (MDMP), although the OMLTs observed that Western-style structured analysis were unnatural to the ANA, who in the best case had some officers who had received formal military training during the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan, but more often than not were elevated to the position of officer by virtue of their family's status or even only on their ability to read.

The only combat incident for OMLT 5A occurred at the end of the tour, as the OMLT/ANA supported a Battlegroup patrol near Gharam, in the north of the Deh Rawood district. The long-range exchange of fire did not result in any casualties; however, the ANA reverted to type as the OMLT found it impossible to initiate fire disciple: "the ANA fired back with everything they had to their disposal, despite our inability to observe any enemy."[193] Shortly after this incident, the BVE transferred its mandate to a French OMLT, which terminated the Dutch OMLT efforts in Deh Rawood. As OMLT 4A prepared their transfer to Tarin Kowt and subsequently back to the Netherlands, the differences between the French and the Dutch were already discernible. "When the ANA was left without food, we were usually willing to give them some food money. The French were adamant in their stance that the ANA would have to fetch for themselves."[194] The French drew from SFA-type operations they conducted in Africa, as the French logistical officer stated that "[t]he Africans and Afghans see you as the rich man, and they intend to exploit that fact. They both have their needs, such as fuel, and they want you to provide that. For us and for them it is like a game of chicken; who will yield first? We will give them nothing, that is our solution. They have their own logistical chain, let them use that."[195]

192 Interview Dutch Senior Sergeant mentor 55, 08/12/2020.

193 Interview Dutch company mentor 79, 15/12/2020.

194 Leeuwenburg and Wiltenburg, *Met Geweer en Geduld*, 243.

195 Herinneringsboek Korps Mariniers; Leeuwenburg and Wiltenburg, *Met Geweer en Geduld*, 243.

The Marine mentor team from OMLT 5B was assigned to mentor the ANA in the Tarin Kowt bowl. Its twenty-four-strong detachment was reinforced shortly before embarking to Afghanistan with two special forces-medics, making a twenty-six-strong total: the most numerous kandak OMLT so far. Again, the OMLT was led by a Marine major, but the tactical aspects of the deployment were led by a subordinate officer, the so-called 'tactical commandant.' Like the Army OMLT, the Marines used three-man OMLT teams to support the ANA, but quickly adjusted to four-man teams as they found that an additional man was indispensable. The 5B staff regularly stepped in to provide a fourth mentor, relieving some of the workload. OMLT 5B staffed three outposts like its predecessors, and at the end of the tour a fourth, as patrol base Qudus was also staffed with an ANA detachment. As Tarin Kowt and its surroundings were peaceful during the OMLT 5 tenure, the Marines attempted to teach the ANA the basics of maintenance and logistics. The assessment was that the ANA was more than capable to go into the green zone shooting at everything, but they had a lax attitude towards maintenance. Like the French in Deh Rawood, the 5B Marines were also increasingly unwilling to provide the Afghan troops with food, water, fuel and amenities as it did nothing for the ANA independence on the long term.[196]

Under no pressure from the Taliban, the OMLT also found time to train the ANA on tactics and techniques. One of the OMLT members attempted to have five ANA soldiers take a course in first aid, but found that after a couple of days his class was no longer interested and had decided to skip class, ending the OMLT's initiative. As the Taliban pressure on the Tarin Kowt area increased somewhat during the end of the tour, the Marine detachment was also involved in a few incidents. Despite the Marine's infantry training given to the ANA, the OMLT found that their mentorship revolved around "herding the ANA into firing their weapons to a more or less safe area."[197] "The most direct threat probably came from our Afghan colleagues themselves," as a Marine captain recalled the incidents.[198] Nonetheless, the amount of incidents that involved direct contact had seriously decreased over the summer as the Taliban adapted its tactics, and now used IEDs as it main weapon. Also, the now four patrol bases north of Tarin Kowt which were staffed by ANA platoons gave Dutch politicians the opportunity to applaud the 'Afghanisation' of Uruzgan, as they could now state that the 'Dutch Approach' was working as the 'ink blot' was increasing in Uruzgan. The fact that the progress of the ANA was far more nuanced than Dutch Defence Minister Eimert van Middelkoop proclaimed found its reasons in the Dutch extension of the Uruzgan

196 Ibid., 246.

197 Ibid., 255.

198 Interview Dutch tactical CO / Advisor 37, 01/10/2020; Leeuwenburg and Wiltenburg, *Met Geweer en Geduld*, 258.

mission with an additional two years, starting in August 2008.[199] Apparently, the need to report successes outweighed a truthful and nuanced depiction of ANA's present maturity.

With the OMLT's mission in Deh Rawood now completed, the 5B team would hand over to another Marine detachment, and the Dutch would also stay in charge of the Brigade OMLT. July 2008 marked the handover of the OMLT to what would be the last Marine OMLT in Uruzgan.[200]

4.2.6 OMLT 6B

OMLT 6 consisted of a Marine detachment, OMLT 6B; however, the French Army had taken over part of the mentoring, resulting in the 6A detachment being staffed with French soldiers. Notwithstanding the earlier success of selecting NCOs and officers from a regular Marine battalion, the 6B rotation was again staffed by assigning Marines who were available and volunteering. OMLT 6B thus consisted of Marines from the Marine Joint Effect Battery (MJEB), a combat support unit, as well as the 2nd boat company, 22 infantry company and the Marine Special Forces unit. The OMLT was led by the commanding officer of the MJEB. Unlike previous rotations, OMLT 6B did not have the opportunity to train with an ANA company in Hohenfels, as it was not available. Instead, the OMLT had to role-play for the Australian OMLT and vice versa.

The new detachment stuck with the previous rotations' modus operandus to assign four OMLT members per team, and in this composition the first patrols were conducted. Again, the OMLT was dispersed over the numerous patrol bases in the greater Tarin Kowt area. As the ANA had by now received training in the MDMP process for years, the ANA NCO who led the first convoy operation to Kandahar in which the OMLT would partake was however still clear about his options under enemy fire: "During the ANA NCOs briefing, it became quite clear that everybody would look at us in the event of a calamity. Because we only just met these soldiers and were unsure about their capabilities, we were happy to assume the leading role, and so we did. The ANA seemed content about this."[201] As the convoy arrived in Kandahar, the OMLT witnessed a number of ANA soldiers jumping out of the vehicles, as they took the opportunity to either take their leave or desert from the Army. As the ANA leadership did not intervene, the OMLT were reduced to bystanders, the general sentiment being that the OMLT should not interfere in these matters.[202]

199 See: "Kabinetscrisis 2010: de Uruzgan-crisis," https://www.parlement.com/id/vicxczwrt5h4/kabinetscrisis_2010_de_uruzgan_crisis.

200 Herinneringsboek Korps Mariniers.

201 Leeuwenburg and Wiltenburg, *Met Geweer en Geduld*, 267; Interview Dutch company mentor 34, 23/11/2020.

202 Interview Dutch company mentor 34, 23/11/2020; Interview Dutch infantryman / instructor 6, 16/11/2020.

As the 6B rotation started the routine of training and patrolling on the patrol bases, it rekindled the attempts to shape the Afghan Army companies into a more effective organisation. On patrol base Buman, the OMLT's attempts to instil the virtues of delegation to the ANA officers did not fall on fertile ground, as the ANA officers insisted on doing everything themselves: "probably a cultural issue," according to a Marine sergeant major.[203]

The insurgents by now used primarily stand-off tactics to harass ISAF and ANA forces. Regularly, 107 mm rockets were fired towards patrol bases, which, however disturbing, had no impact. The IED threat was more tangible, and as the ANA still had its 'inshallah' attitude, the structured searching for improvised explosives was impaired by cultural issues as well as the lack of proper equipment and training.

The effectiveness of the OMLT was also affected by the Afghan soldiers' tendency to have the Ramadan take precedence over ISAF's operational priorities. The annual Muslim custom of observing a month of fasting thus reduced daytime operations to a minimum.[204] Any OMLT-incited operations near the patrol bases were concluded by September 2008, when all Marines were called back to Kamp Holland to support the voter registration in Daykundi and Gizab—both areas being void of ANA or ISAF presence. This project was supported by the fourth kandak of the ANA brigade, but as this was a relatively inexperienced unit, and their assignment was to function as a Quick Reaction Force (QRF), the battalion needed additional training. The QRF was by its nature supposed to perform a number of different tasks, often on short notice, so QRFs needed to be trained on a number of different operational assignments. Again, the OMLT officers took up command, as the 4th kandak officers were considered to be too inexperienced to lead their platoons in complex operations. As the QRF might be deployed by air, the OMLT and ANA practiced in helicopter mock-ups and were briefed on the specifics of air mobility. Unfortunately, no helicopters were available for a full-dress rehearsal, so the makeshift preparations had to make do. Despite violent incidents during the voter registration in other provinces, the Daykundi and Gizab registration progressed without issue, and the Dutch OMLTs were subsequently moved to the Mirabad valley to reinforce the newly constructed patrol base Atiq from 31 October 2008 onwards. OMLT 6B's presence on Atiq was without incident, and on 18 November the OMLT tasks were transferred to an Australian OMLT, allowing the Marines to redeploy to the Netherlands on 26 November.

The Marines' redeployment marked the start of a nine-month period in which no Dutch infantry kandak OMLT was present in Afghanistan. The French had taken over in Deh Rawood, and the Australians served in the Tarin Kowt area together with the ANA. The Dutch OMLT

203 Leeuwenburg and Wiltenburg, *Met Geweer en Geduld*, 273.

204 Ibid., 66, 124, 273, 276.

effort was thus limited by leading and partially staffing the multinational Brigade OMLT in Tarin Kowt.

4.2.7 The Brigade OMLTs

The total ANA presence in Uruzgan was a mere 300 personnel in 2006, but as the counterinsurgency progressed, this number was increased to 2,250 in February 2008, of which about 1,750 were actually present in the province, the rest being on leave, training or AWOL. In 2009, the total number of Afghan soldiers had increased to 3,100 (2,000 actually present). By now, the Afghan Brigade staff numbered 188, including a staff-company, five sections, engineers and fire support and several smaller additions—finance, legal, public affairs, etc. Located in Tarin Kowt on the border between Camp Holland and the ANA camp, the Brigade staff was mentored by a Dutch-led OMLT since late 2007. The ANA commanding officer and his section chiefs were matched by an OMLT officer in order to further professionalise the Brigade staff. However, although the ANA and ISAF were supposed to be complimentary, the early OMLT commanders noticed that an informal culture of apartheid interfered with joint operations. Colonel Baartman, the first Brigade OMLT commander, observed that "the TFU produced an operations order—involving the ANA—but the ANA officers were not allowed to be present at the orders brief. They were formally considered to be 'friendly forces,' but were de facto not considered to be full-fledged."[205]

The second rotations' commanding officer, Colonel Sondag, made an effort to intensify the cooperation between the TFU units and the ANA, attempting to synchronise the infantry OMLTs, the Battlegroup and the ANA's operations. However, it would take to February 2008 before the TFU would integrate the OMLT into its decision-making process.[206] The ANA was still excluded, the TFU citing reasons for operational security. The ANA was clearly not trusted with the classified intel produced by the TFU staff and its subsidiaries. The tendency to solicit ANA troops to fulfil the TFU pretence of an 'Afghan face' during operations was difficult to amend, although progress was made over the years. In April 2008, the ANA brigade was present at a TFU order brief, and in May of that year, regular meetings were held between the TFU staff and the ANA Brigade, with the OMLT monitoring the congregations. These meetings resulted in the sharing of information and intentions between the Dutch and Afghans; however, operational security remains a concern: "The cooperation between the TFU and ANA needed to be better and more forceful, as it was part of the exit strategy. The real knowledge of the population and the enemy was with the ANA Brigade. However, the TFU intel sections always referred to operational security as a reason not to share intelligence.

205 Interview Dutch OMLT BDE CO 85, 02/04/2020 & 22/04/2020.

206 Interview Dutch OMLT BDE CO 76, 02/09/2020.

The wall between the Dutch and the Afghans was higher than we wanted, and it was rebuilt at the beginning of every rotation."[207]

During the next few months, the OPSEC struggles were reduced as the Dutch (and Australians subordinate to the TFU commander) realised that the directives concerning OPSEC "must be relaxed to reflect the cooperation between the ANA and mentors."[208] The Battlegroup was the first to act on these insights as it started to plan and execute operations jointly. However, the TFU staff maintained the practice to "plan an operation and afterwards inform the ANA that they had to join in on the action."[209] As Colonel Ooms handed his tasks over to Colonel Verweij, he reiterated the need for collaboration and partnering as he reminded the TFU staff in his speech that "[o]ne cannot ask for an 'Afghan face,' one should ask for an Afghan unit."[210] Ooms' statement referred to ISAF's commander David McKiernan's new directive, that Afghan units should no longer be trained and subsequently be guided during operations, but that a further integration through 'partnering' would be implemented. This would include joint planning, preparation and execution of operations.[211] To this end, an ops room was set up within the Afghan HQ, and during the tenure of Colonel Ooms, the commanding officers of the Battlegroup paid a visit to the ANA camp with some regularity.[212] Indeed, the cooperation was considered to be more constructive, with a steady increase in the ANA involvement in TFU operational planning. Still, the 'Afghan face' paradigm proved hard to break, as Ooms' successor, Colonel Verweij, also had to remind his Dutch colleagues regularly that requests for "a few Afghans" just would not do.[213]

The combination of McKiernan's directive and new TFU leadership resulted in the intensivation of the Afghan-Dutch cooperation. Colonel Matthijssen's TFU 5 approached the upcoming general election in Afghanistan as a joint effort, and the Battlegroup operation TURA GHAR in January 2009 was considered to be an improvement in joint planning and execution. Still, the OMLT brigade staff felt that the TFU overstretched the ANA's capability to follow the TFU's operational tempo.[214] Verweij felt that when considering the partnering concept, both partners should be comfortable with the task and purpose of the mission, and in this case, the TFU asked too much from the nascent ANA formation. Moreover, the OMLT felt that its tasks had been reduced from mentoring and training to being a catalyst

207 Interview Dutch OMLT BDE CO 1, 08/09/2020.

208 Australian Commanding Officer MRTF2.

209 Interview Dutch OMLT BDE CO 1, 08/09/2020.

210 Afscheidsspeech kol Ooms, Tarin Kowt, Uruzgan.

211 D. McKiernan, "Tactical Directive Headquarters International Security Assistance Force (ISAF)," (Kabul, 2008).

212 Interview Dutch OMLT BDE CO 1, 08/09/2020.

213 Interview Dutch OMLT BDE CO 90, 08/10/2020 & 05/11/2020.

214 Weekly rapport Col. W. Verweij to the TFU staff.

and the mouthpiece of the TFU staff.[215] A final problem for Verweij was that the by now multinational OMLT staff—the Australians had joined the Dutch in mentoring the ANA—had different national chains of command that took precedence over Verweij's intent.[216] Still, glimmers of improvement were observed by both the OMLT and the TFU. Matthijssen stated that "the Afghan National Army has made great strides in its operational process" and "we have also improved the cooperation with the ANA by partnering the ANA brigade staff with the TFU's."[217] TFU 6 commander[218] Brigadier General Middendorp praised the ANA-TFU collaboration during operation MANI GHAR in 2009, which included over 1,000 ISAF and ANA soldiers. The OMLT regarded this operation as an example that the ANA were indeed capable to plan operations.[219] Moreover, in an attempt to integrate the multinational security efforts in Uruzgan, Middendorp attempted to fuse the endeavours of ISAF, provincial leadership, the ANA, local police, the Afghan secret service NDS and the Dutch civilian representative into what would become known as the 'Big Six.'[220] To guide these efforts, a Provincial Operational Coordination Centre (OCC-P) was established in Kamp Holland. As the Afghan Army was ordered to provide staff and leadership to the OCC-P, the Dutch OMLT was subsequently involved in providing mentoring and guidance to working in what in essence was an Afghan operations room.[221]

4.2.8 OMLT 8C

With the departure of the OMLT 6B rotation out of Uruzgan in November 2008, a seven-month period commenced in which no Dutch kandak-level OMLTs were present in Uruzgan. Indeed, the only Dutch service members who were part of the wider OMLT organisation were part of the Brigade OMLT. During the seven-month hiatus, the mentoring and training of the ANA were conducted by French and Australian OMLTs. With the arrival of the 3rd kandak of 205th Corps, the need for an additional OMLT was recognised by the Dutch Directorate of Operations, and in 2008, 43 Brigade Reconnaissance Squadron (43 Brigade Verkenningseskadron, 43 BVE) was again tasked.[222] At this time, 43 BVE was commanded by Gerhard "Joe" Schouwstra, who drew on the squadron's previous experience to both staff and guide his soldiers for the upcoming deployment. Like his predecessor, Schouwstra divided his teams into three-man groups, this time also supported by an organic medical support team consisting of an army nurse and two medics. As the OMLT trios were supposed to be formed around junior officers

215 Interview Dutch OMLT BDE CO 90, 08/10/2020 & 05/11/2020, Interview Dutch OMLT BDE XO 91, 08/10/2020 & 05/11/2020.

216 Ibid.

217 Afscheidsrede Col Matthijssen, Tarin Kowt, Uruzgan

218 As of the 6th rotation, the TFU commander was a Brigadier General, being upgraded from Colonel.

219 Evaluation report Col Verweij.

220 Leeuwenburg and Wiltenburg, *Met Geweer en Geduld*, 166; Interview Dutch TFU CO 100, 17/09/2021.

221 Ibid., 168–69.

222 Ibid., *Met Geweer en Geduld*, 310.

and NCOs, several Corporals were promoted to Sergeant for the duration of the deployment, making them—at least in name—senior enough to participate in an advisory fashion.[223]

As the period between the reception of the assignment and the deployment to Uruzgan was limited, 43BVE made good use of the OMLT veterans within its ranks to prepare.[224] The customary ANA troops supporting NATO's OMLT exercise in Hohenfels had been replaced by US National Guard troops. This proved to be a detriment to the sense of immersion into local Afghan norms and values for the training audience, as the training vis-à-vis a genuine Afghan partner, using interpreters proved impossible. Upon arrival, the pre-deployment detachment was able to acquire vehicles, communication systems and shelter for the incoming OMLT. However, no incumbent OMLT was present as this was the first rotation, and no sign was to be found of the 3rd kandak. As OMLT 8C was only able to scout the terrain, and prepare for any future instruction, a general sense of frustration rose as the detachment could not make sense of the pressure put on the OMLT to quickly deploy to Uruzgan, only to find there was little to do for them in the area of operations. Approximately one month after arrival, the 3rd kandak made its appearance in Tarin Kowt, accompanied by a US Special Forces escort. However, the arrival of the Afghan unit only led to additional frustration as the soldier skills of the arriving soldiers were less than rudimentary.[225] As OMLT 8C's anticipated to mentor and coach the 3rd kandak's participation in company and battalions sized manoeuvres, it had to settle for providing the ANA soldiers with basic marksmanship courses and driving lessons.[226]

A subsequent surprise for Schouwstra's OMLT was that the ODA which accompanied the ANA kandak informed him that although the Dutch were more than welcome to provide training to the Afghans, the 'ownership' of 3 kandak with regards to operations would befall to the Americans. As such, the OMLT would indeed be relegated to a training-only outfit. Eventually, it would require prolonged talks between senior Dutch and American leadership to settle on a compromise. The infantry battalions would be mentored by the US ODA, and the kandak staff, the staff company and the heavy-weapons company would be mentored by the Dutch OMLT. Still, this solution was only addressing the problem on paper. Schouwstra observed that

> as an OMLT we were not taken seriously by either the TFU staff or the OMLT Brigade. Initially, nobody could inform us when we could start working as a mentor, and

223 Herinneringsboek OMLT 8C.

224 Interview Dutch INF OMLT CO 116, 12/04/2021; Interview Dutch NCO mentor / instructor 58, 16/12/2020 & 14/04/2021.

225 Leeuwenburg and Wiltenburg, *Met Geweer en Geduld*, 311; Interview Dutch NCO mentor / instructor 39, 21/10/2020 & 06/04/2021.

226 Interview Dutch NCO mentor / instructor 118, 10/05/2021.

> afterwards, we were pretty much confined to the camp as a training outfit. Moreover, the kandak staff was unwilling to participate in operations, preferring to drink tea and chat. The ANA had a totally different mindset than we had envisioned. With both the TFU as well as the Brigade OMLT seemingly uninterested, we had to resort to formulating our own assignments.[227]

The 2009 elections in Uruzgan brought some work to the Dutch, who were also involved in a convoy operation from Kandahar to Tarin Kowt mid-September. Still, only after the Australian OMLT in the Mirabad Valley (east of the capital) shifted its attention further eastwards, did OMLT 8C find enduring and meaningful work—at least for part of the team. As of the beginning of October, 3rd kandak soldiers and the OMLT would man patrol base Atiq in the Mirabad Valley. For the remainder of their employment, OMLT 8C and the ANA would patrol the immediate vicinity of PB Atiq. As OMLT 8C had not been incorporated adequately into the larger OMLT/TFU force structure, the individual members were forced to scrounge for personnel and materiel. Through a military acquaintance, 60 mm mortars were acquired, and an NCO of the Marine Corps was adopted to search for IEDs during patrols.

During its deployment, OMLT 8C experienced a sense of abandonment whilst on PB Atiq, and with no direction from higher up the chain of command, as well as little incentive from the ANA to commit itself to a scheme of intensive patrolling, no progress was made during the last month with regards to further professionalising the ANA.[228] Indeed, as the last rotation was preparing to take over, and the Netherlands starting the preparations to withdraw from Uruzgan, the general sentiment amongst the service members was that the OMLT and TFU were going through the motions before finalising its commitment.[229] After a rather unsatisfactory deployment, OMLT 8C handed over to OMLT 9C in November 2009.

4.2.9 OMLT 9C

The 9th iteration of the OMLT was again formed up around a reconnaissance squadron: 42 BVE from Oirschot, which was part of 13 Mechanised Brigade. As the incumbent commander was unable to take command due to personal reasons, his successor-to-be, Major Ruud Theunissen, was pushed forward to lead the OMLT. The Squadron, however, was unable to staff the OMLT with the required number of NCOs. By now a common practice, Theunissen had to staff almost half of his contingent with privates and corporals, duly promoted to the temporary rank of Sergeant for the duration of the deployment. One junior officer was found lacking in his leadership and was relegated to a staff position, further depleting the capacity of OMLT 9C. Moreover, due to reasons unknown to the squadron, the medical team had

227 Interview Dutch INF OMLT CO 116, 12/04/2021.

228 Leeuwenburg and Wiltenburg, *Met Geweer en Geduld*, 320–21.

229 OMLT Evaluation Colonel Bastin, 4.

been scrapped from the organisation table, leaving the OMLT exposed in its combat service support capacity.

On 17 November 2009, the detachment deployed to Afghanistan, where it was duly informed on the ground truth by its predecessors in a three-day HOTO programme. After the HOTO, OMLT 9C moved to patrol base ATIQ, where it was limited to base security and basic training efforts as the absence of enablers limited any ventures out in the Mirabad Valley. Only after the TFU waived the mandatory search capacity for Dutch patrols were regular foot patrols possible. In the same vein, the availability of forward air controllers and the aforementioned medical support restricted any rigorous presence by the TFU/ANA in the Mirabad Valley.

After a relatively quiet period on patrol base ATIQ, the kandak the OMLT mentors were relocated to Helmand province in order to participate in the largest ISAF operation so far. Operation MOSHTARAK aimed to clear central Helmand from the Taliban, with the main focal point being the town of Marjah. As both the brigade commander and the Dutch TFU opposed the transfer of the kandak to Helmand, British General Nick Carter perfidiously used the 205th corps commander to order the transfer, rather than the ISAF chain of command, both the ANA Brigade CO and the TFU commander were unable to prevent the thinning of the ANA presence in Uruzgan.[230] Worse for the OMLT, as the geographic restrictions for the Dutch troops were still in place, the OMLT were not allowed to follow their mentees into the operation, leaving the kandak under the supervision of the American Taskforce-72. This led to an operational pause for the OMLT, which ended after several weeks when a French-trained company of the 1st kandak arrived on Atiq.

The change of ANA company on Atiq brought forth more issues, as the new subunit—like its predecessors—was less than motivated to patrol or train, preferring drinking tea in the shelters. One officer stated that "as the ANA were not under our command, there was little we could do about this situation."[231] With the 3rd kandak still in Helmand and the new unit quite unmotivated to perform any action resembling working, the deployment was less than challenging for the reconnaissance troops, which had to make due until they could transfer its responsibilities to an Australian OMLT mid-March 2010.[232] The perceived lack of interest of both the ANA as well as the TFU led to scathing remarks from the senior staff of the OMLT. A telling statement from one of the officers was that he had "never experience any integral approach from the TFU with regards to the OMLT/ANA. Moreover, there was no

230 Anthony King, "Operation Moshtarak: Counter-insurgency Command in Kandahar 2009–10," *Journal of Strategic Studies* 44, no. 1 (2021): 51.

231 Interview Dutch INF OMLT XO 119, 07/04/2021.

232 Leeuwenburg and Wiltenburg, *Met Geweer en Geduld*, 330.

synchronisation at all with the Dutch Battlegroup in order to jointly achieve any effects."[233] His remarks were corroborated by the last commanding officer of the Dutch Battlegroup, as he could not remember the presence of the OMLT at all.[234] The reports of both Theunissen and brigade-OMLT CO Colonel Leuvering echoed these criticisms in their after-action reports, with the OMLT XO even went on record to state the "the ANA was used to enable TFU operational efforts, we [the OMLT and ANA] were used as a stop-gap measure, rather than being put in our strength. We [the Dutch] have underachieved in this respect."[235]

With the Australians now in charge of the infantry OMLT on ATIQ, the reconnaissance squadron returned home on 5 April 2010. The Brigade OMLT followed suit a few weeks later, ending the four-year effort to guide the ANA towards proficiency and independence.

4.3 Subconclusion

This chapter described how the Dutch Armed Forces have committed to the OMLT tasks, which started with the more or less casual remark in the 2005 Article 100-letter that the Dutch government presented to parliament. Starting off with a twelve-man strong detachment in 2006, the OMLT in Uruzgan grew into a multinational effort led by a Dutch colonel. The growth of the OMLTs was by and large in line with the expansion of the Afghan National Army as a whole. Nonetheless, the Dutch government as well as the Ministry of Defence had put a premium on the Battlegroup and TFU, which led to institutional neglect of the OMLT. Ironically, this caused a contradiction by design as the strategic end state—a self-sufficient Afghan government—was heavily reliant on stable and effective security forces. The strategic importance was however not followed by prioritising OMLT staffing and equipment.

Indeed, the first OMLT was put together from a host of different units, and thus comprised a dozen individuals who were oblivious to the scale and scope of their tasks. An ISAF-prompted enlargement of the detachment led to a certification in early 2007, but as this chapter has described, the certification was pushed through despite organisational shortcomings in equipment and staff. During later iterations, the staffing of the Dutch OMLTs remained an issue, as the Dutch Armed forces continued to "scrape the barrel" for personnel. Eventually, the only OMLTs drawn from regular units were not infantry, but cavalry/reconnaissance troops, as the Brigade Reconnaissance Squadrons took their place in the line for four rotations. The lack of selection with the OMLTs contributed to some intricate issues during the deployments, including repeated interservice rivalry issues, senior NCOs that flat out

233 Interview Dutch INF OMLT XO 119, 07/04/2021.

234 Interview Dutch INF BG CO 110, 20/03/2020 & 21/07/2020 & 20/04/2021

235 Interview Interview Dutch INF OMLT XO 119, 07/04/2021; Briefing Theunissen TFU "Current Situation in the Atiq AO" in OWD 20100326; Leuvering, Evaluatie DOPS OMLT 6, p. 21.

refused to join patrols outside of the relative safety of Camp Holland, and masking individual incompetency by appointing 'tactical commanders,' relegating the appointed commanding officers to an administrative command. Lastly, the lack of experienced NCOs and officers to mentor the ANA with a degree of authority and expertise necessitated promoting private soldiers and corporals to the rank of sergeant. Although this allowed the Dutch armed forces to staff the OMLTs with the correct amount of NCOs, this was of course only an outward appearance and did little to ensure the level of experience which was implied by ISAF's staffing table for mentor teams. Another indication of the staffing problems for the OMLTs was the persistent presence of OMLT 'part-timers,' NCOs and officers who were found to have enough time to share their assigned jobs with the OMLT.

The process of equipping the OMLTs encountered similar issues. As no regular unit held any responsibility for equipping the mentor teams, the OMLTs frequently had to resort to friendly faces assigned to the Battlegroup or parent units for enough working equipment. Borrowing and even stealing from other units thus happened as the Dutch Army and Marine Corps were unable to supply the OMLTs with enough vehicles, weapons and optics to approximate the level of firepower, protection and mobility that the Battlegroup subunits could fall back on.

With the increased ANA presence in Uruzgan and the subsequent increased OMLT, the multinational Brigade OMLT attempted to synchronise the efforts between the Dutch-led TFU, the ANA and the OMLTs. This attempted unity of effort was hard to achieve, as neither entity held the authority to exercise command over the other: the ANA Brigade had its own chain of command, the OMLT staff's hierarchy was compromised by its multinational character and the TFU showed—at least according to successive OMLT commanding officers—little incentive to adhere to either McKiernan's or McCrystal's directives for increased and continued Afghan-ISAF partnerships. Initially, the lack of integration of the OMLTs with the TFU efforts allowed field grade OMLT officers to independently lead their OMLT/ANA combination into unconventional and cavalier schemes of manoeuvre. Later rotations also took their liberty as the TFU's neglect of the daily course of events on the patrol bases was mostly left to junior officers and NCOs. Although much to the delight of the lieutenants and sergeants who were not accustomed to such a degree of freedom, it did little for the unity of effort during the counterinsurgency campaign. Still, larger operations such as those mentioned in this chapter did comprise a larger involvement of both ANA and OMLT, taking a prodigious effort—mostly of individual senior commanding officers—to involve the Afghan Army in the TFU's plans.

In terms of pre-deployment preparation and training, the successive OMLTs were mostly left to their own merits in terms of designing and executing pre-deployment training. Apart from the Hohenfels training course—and its brigade-OMLT equivalent in Bydgoszcz, Poland, which were both highly rated and would become a staple of the OMLT's preparation—each

rotation prepared to its best knowledge and intention, but without any perceived interference or support from the Directorate of Operations. With the succession of OMLTs over the years, more knowledge was informally disseminated as the small Dutch officer and NCO corps were quick to find each other to share experiences and best practices. Nonetheless, the pre-deployment training of OMLT was mostly based on the individual efforts of its participants, rather than, for instance, the Army-led series of Uruzgan Integration exercises designed to prepare the Dutch Battlegroups and TFU staff. Some rotations benefitted from the presence of experienced cadres who were either going in for a second tour or were available to share experiences with their peers as they were training up for a rotation.

Lastly, as stated earlier in this research, no doctrine on either SFA or combat mentoring was present in the Dutch Army, nor is it at the time of writing. The lack of formal thought on the subject implies that the learning processes have not been processed towards either formal learning or institutionalisation. The ad hoc composition of the OMLTs is causal factor, as regular units often have some sort of internal reporting process on tactics, techniques or procedures. As the OMLTs were disbanded immediately after returning to the Netherlands, this did not occur at any stage of the deployment. The major exception was the iterations of the reconnaissance squadrons; however, as an independent company-sized subunit subordinated to a brigade, the BVEs lacked the staff capacity to formalise lessons learned. Individual OMLT experiences were disseminated through, for example, regimental gazettes and professional literature; however, both the depth and extent of the articles were disproportional to the discourse on battlegroup experiences.

As little action was taken either by the Directorate of Operations or the Dutch Army on the lessons identified by the successive OMLTs, it is no surprise that this institutional inertia has endured not only for the duration of the Uruzgan deployment but remains to this day.[236] The stunning resemblance of the End of Mission reports drafted by the colonels leading the OMLTs from 2007 onwards, provides evidence to the statement that the Dutch Directorate of Operation was stuck on the idée fixe of staffing the Battlegroups and TFU to the best of its ability, with OMLT more of an operational afterthought for much of the period.

236 R. G. Steehouwer, Security Force Assistance Binnen de Koninklijke Landmacht: Operatie Interflex, Breda 2023; E. J. Latul, Toekomstige Security Force Assistance inzet van de Nederlandse Krijgsmacht, Breda, 2022.