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

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Chapter 5

Chapter 5: The Belgian OMLTs in Kunduz

5.1 Introduction

The Belgian armed forces have been involved in Afghanistan since 2002. Initially, this involvement only included guarding the international airport of Kabul (KAIA) and logistical support in providing ISAF with tactical air transport via a C-130 aeroplane. As the growth of the Afghan National Security Forces had to be facilitated by increasing numbers of NATO trainers and operational mentors, NATO requested additional OMLTs from its member states.¹ On 1 February 2008, the Belgian government decided to contribute to the development of the ANA by committing one OMLT to be deployed by the end of 2008.² This proposal was presented to parliament, resulting in a resolution intending to expand the Belgian contribution to Afghanistan by around twenty personnel in either Kunduz province or the capital city of Kabul. The Belgian parliament was hesitant; contributing to the development of the Afghan security forces through training and mentoring was considered a worthwhile endeavour, but losing Belgian lives by participating in a high-risk deployment in Afghanistan was beyond the appetite of many risk-averse politicians. Indeed, a ‘red card holder,’ an officer who could cancel any operation deemed too risky, and national caveats were installed to further reduce the possibility of casualties.³

After the parliament’s approval, Belgian OMLTs would support the ANA in nine rotations from the beginning of 2009 to mid-2012 in Kunduz province. After 2012, the Belgian OMLT evolved into Military Advisor Teams (MATs), of which another two rotations would further assist the ANA until mid-2013. This chapter will recount the Belgian involvement in the OMLT operations in Kunduz province, providing a detailed overview of the Belgian SFA effort in Afghanistan in the 2009–2012 bracket.

5.1.1 Belgian Strategic Culture

Belgium is a small federal state divided into the French-speaking area of Wallonia and the Dutch-speaking province of Flanders. With Brussels as the capital and centre for several international organisations, Belgium acts as a significant diplomatic hub—“a manifestation of Belgium’s desire for multilateralism and alliances.”⁴ Since its existence, Belgium has

1 NATO Public Diplomacy Division, *Afghanistan Report 2009*, NATO (Brussels, 2009), 13, https://www.nato.int/nato_static/assets/pdf/pdf_2009_03/20090331_090331_afghanistan_report_2009.pdf.

2 Zitting Belgische Senaat en Kamer van volksvertegenwoordigers, zitting 2007–2008. Het regeringsbeleid betreffende Afghanistan: uiteenzetting van de heer Pieter de Crem, minister van Landsverdediging, 13 February 2008.

3 Belgische Kamer van Volksvertegenwoordigers, voorstel tot resolutie, 9 July 2008.

4 Michel Liégeois and Galia Glume, “A Small Power under the Blue Helmet: The Evolution of Belgian Peacekeeping Policy,” *Studia Diplomatica* 61, no. 3 (2008): 111, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/44839040>.

promoted a policy of neutrality. It slightly diverged from this after WW1 by signing the Franco-Belgian Military Accord but moved back to its neutrality in the 1930s. Its history is in strong contrast with Belgium's strategic culture in the past decades. While historically being a rather pacifist country, Belgium is now firmly European-orientated and in favour of collective security, multilateralism, and European integration.⁵

Belgium's strong preference for multinationalism is visible through the various multinational operations (under UN, NATO and EU command) it has participated in since the 1990s. These range from Somalia to Lebanon and Afghanistan. One peacekeeping operation made an impact on Belgium's future contributions: UNAMIR (United Nations Assistance Mission in Rwanda), during which ten Belgian peacekeepers of the Parachutist regiment were killed by rebels.⁶ This led to the end of the Belgian contribution to UNAMIR in a country where genocide was taking place. It would be a traumatic experience for Belgium, similar to the Netherlands' Srebrenica.⁷

The two pillars of Belgium's security policy are NATO and the EU.⁸ Belgium presents itself as a "small but reliable" and "responsible and credible" partner.⁹ Participation in these multinational operations is important for Belgium because "it is the only way of maintaining militarily relevant capabilities in a cost-effective manner."¹⁰ Pooling resources has become one of Belgium's main priorities. Therefore, the country is also largely in favour of military cooperation within the EU. In terms of willingness to use military force, Belgium's emphasis is on peace operations and conflict prevention rather than on combat operations.¹¹ This must be understood in the context of Belgium's pacifist history, with its neutrality violated twice during World War I and World War II. Public opinion plays an important role as well: only when there is a legal just cause will a combat operation be implemented. Yet this creates a paradox: on the one hand, Belgium has strong, principled support for collective security

5 Heiko Biehl, Bastian Giegerich, and Alexandra Jonas, *Strategic Cultures in Europe: Security and Defence Policies Across the Continent* (Springer Fachmedien Wiesbaden GmbH, 2013), 33, <http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/mindef/detail.action?docID=1206216>.

6 Tim Haesebrouck, "Belgium: The Reliable Free Rider," *International Politics* 58, no. 1 (2021): 44, <https://doi.org/10.1057/s41311-020-00221-z>.

7 Liégeois and Glume, "A Small Power under the Blue Helmet," 118.

8 Haesebrouck, "Belgium: The Reliable Free Rider," 41.

9 Sven Biscop, *Belgian Defence Policy The Fight Goes On*, Egmont Institute (2011), 1, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/resrepo6569>.

10 Biehl, Giegerich, and Jonas, *Strategic Cultures in Europe*, 37.

11 Michel Liégeois, "Belgium's Multilateral Politics 2010–2015," *Studia Diplomatica* 68, no. 2 (2015): 31, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/26531646>; Biehl, Giegerich, and Jonas, *Strategic Cultures in Europe*, 38.

through organisations such as NATO and the EU that has the ‘risk’ of having to use force. On the other hand, Belgium’s major parties, leaders and public are rather pacifistic.¹²

Belgian decision-making regarding the deployment of armed forces is in the hands of the executive, without consent necessary from parliament.¹³ Debates on defence policymaking rarely exist in Belgium as political attention on the matter is low. Therefore, the passive role of parliament regarding decisions on armed forces is no source of debate.¹⁴ According to Biscop, the lack of a specific budget for crisis operations is, however, a limiting factor when it comes to deployment decisions. Only long-term ongoing deployments are provided for, while funds for additional deployment are dependent upon additional funds.¹⁵ Furthermore, the replacement of territorial defence with expeditionary operations has led to a cut in the defence budget: from 1.37 per cent of GDP in 2000 to 1.09 per cent in 2011.¹⁶ This trend of decreasing Belgian defence expenditure has an impact on the armed forces: “[the size of the professional force] is forecast to continue falling to approximately 25.000 or below.”¹⁷ Even more important, it has affected the quality of Belgian defence.

Further complicating and directing Belgian strategic culture is the Belgian *linguistic divide* – it becomes more difficult to symmetrically spread the bases. “The constrained investment space is triggering ever more serious rivalry amongst the different armed services.”¹⁸ An important tool in grand strategy and thereby defining strategic culture is the tool of the arms embargo that, through linguistic dynamics, is defederalised.¹⁹ Ultimately, Belgium’s strategic culture has directed the country’s stance towards several interventions, including in Afghanistan. Belgium’s commitment to international law, and thereby the requirement of a UNSC resolution, has, for instance, led to a critical position on the US push for Iraq without a mandate.²⁰ According to De Grave, “In Belgium, the country’s strategic narrative only allowed for the deployment of a mostly symbolic contribution to Afghanistan.”²¹

12 Biscop, *Belgian Defence Policy*, 1.

13 This does not mean that parliamentary approval is not sought before deployments, as was the case for the OMLTs.

14 Biehl, Giegerich, and Jonas, *Strategic Cultures in Europe*, 36.

15 Ibid., 36.

16 Ibid., 38.

17 Alexander Mattelaer, “Strategic Insurance: The Future of the Belgian Armed Forces,” *Personnel* 1, no. 3.40 (2014): 2.

18 Mattelaer, “Strategic Insurance: The Future of the Belgian Armed Forces,” 3.

19 Personal correspondence Jan Weuts 26/06/2023.

20 Ibid. 26/06/2023.

21 W. De Grave, “Who Is Ready to Bleed for the United States?,” Masters Thesis (University of Amsterdam, 2015), 56.

5.1.2 The Belgian Political Decision-making Process

As a small state monarchy that sits across the fault line that separates German and Latin cultures, the Belgian people are politically, linguistically and culturally diverse. This has affected the Belgium polity in that the Belgium federal state is comprised of three communities and three regions that are based on four language areas. Although this division has made governing the state an intrinsically complex endeavour, deciding on the use of the armed forces is solely invested at the federal level.

Article 167 of the Belgian constitution states that “the King commands the armed forces and determines the state of war and the cessation of hostilities.”²² As the role of the King has become ceremonial, the executive—the Minister of Defence in particular—controls the military.²³ The Belgian decision-making triangle thus consists of the Minister of Defence, the Minister of Foreign Affairs and the Prime Minister. The formalisation of decisions in regard occurs within the cabinet with final approval by the council of ministers.²⁴ The Belgian Chief of Defence has no real decisional authority concerning military deployments other than in his role of adviser to the Minister of Defence.²⁵ Although the Belgian parliament’s task is to control the executive, it has very few tools to do so, as the parliament is only informed about troop deployments. The general scrutiny and oversight powers of parliament, thus, do not include a constitutional or legal right to approve or reject the use of force.²⁶

In 2007, Belgium held federal elections. During the formation, Pieter de Crem (Christian Democratic and Flemish Party) was selected as the Minister of Defence. De Crem was “more pro-NATO and pro-United States than his predecessor and believed the Belgians needed to demonstrate its commitment to NATO in a more visible manner. The F-16 deployment in Kandahar and the OMLT were both visible symbols of that commitment.”²⁷ As the Belgium democracy is “one of the most fragmented party systems of any modern democracy,” De Crem had some difficulties in guiding the OMLT deployment through the coalition ministers,

22 Nele Verlinden, “Parliamentary Oversight and Democratic Control over Armed Forces with Regard to Military Deployments Abroad: Some Observations on Belgium and the US,” *Mil. L. & L. War Rev.* 55 (2016): 35.

23 Yf Reykers, “Strengthening Parliamentary Oversight of Defence Procurement: Lessons from Belgium,” *European Security* 30, no. 4 (2021): 510.

24 Philippe Lagassé and Stephen M Saideman, “When Civilian Control Is Civil: Parliamentary Oversight of the Military in Belgium and New Zealand,” *European Journal of International Security* 4, no. 1 (2019): 17.

25 David P. Auerswald and Stephen M. Saideman, “NATO in Afghanistan,” in *NATO in Afghanistan* (Princeton University Press, 2014), 171.

26 Hans Born and Heiner Hänggi, *The Use of Force under International Auspices: Strengthening Parliamentary Accountability* (Geneva Centre for the Democratic Control of Armed Forces Geneva, 2005), 5.

27 Auerswald and Saideman, “NATO in Afghanistan,” 171.

resulting in both a cap in time and additional caveats designed to limit personal risk.²⁸ The latter statement will be elaborated upon in the section detailing the preparatory phase of the first OMLT.

5.1.3 Belgian Armed Forces Structure

The Belgian armed forces consist of a so-called “Land Component of the Armed Forces” (the Army), an “Air Component of the Armed Forces” (the Air Force), a “Naval Component of the Armed Forces” (the Navy), and a “Medical Component of the Armed Forces,” which is a uniquely separate branch attending to the medical aspects of Combat Service Support.²⁹ Although the Belgian armed forces had invested in modern equipment during the Cold War, a series of redundancies since 1989 had left the Belgian armed forces with ageing equipment by the time it started its participation in the ISAF mission, with especially the Land Component being in a rather deplorable state.

As Belgium has vast maritime interests, its Naval Component is smaller than other maritime states such as the Netherlands and the United Kingdom. Its only combat-capable vessels are two second-hand Karel Doorman-class frigates purchased in 2005.³⁰ The Air Component has fifty-three operational (out of an original 160) F-16s fighter aircraft that have been modernised to the MLU standard.³¹ The Medical Component is a separate branch that provides medical support to all three other branches. As such, the Medical Component has been active in all Belgian OMLT/MAT rotations, although not as a separate unit, but rather by attaching medical elements to the OMLT/MAT organisation. Historically, most of the Belgian armed forces comprise the Land Component elements.

In the 2009–2012 timeframe, the Land Component transitioned from a mechanised army equipped with tanks and tracked infantry fighting vehicles to an all-wheel, motorised army.³² This allowed the Land Component to lay off the antediluvian Leopard 1 tanks and YPR IFVs and replace these vehicles with Dingo 2 wheeled armoured personnel carriers and Piranha III wheeled armoured vehicle variants. Thirty-nine of the latter were equipped with a direct firing system to support the infantry. The transition from a mechanised to a motorised Land Component allowed the Belgian Army to field a medium capacity. However,

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28 Lijphart, *Patterns of Democracy: Government Forms and Performance in Thirty-six Countries*, 35.

29 <https://www.mil.be/nl/>, accessed 10/05/2022.

30 Brief minister en staatssecretaris met de Marinestudie 2005 - Vaststelling van de begrotingsstaten van het Ministerie van Defensie (X) voor het jaar 2006, <https://www.parlementairemonitor.nl/9353000/1/j9vvij5epmj1ey0/vizaoggdonzu>, accessed 10/05/2022.

31 Email correspondence Major J. Van der Lelij, 10/05/2022.

32 Tom Sauer, “Deep Cooperation by Belgian Defence: Absorbing the Impact of Declining Defence Budgets on National Capabilities,” *Defence Studies* 15, no. 1 (2015): 11.

it lacked the firepower and protection needed to operate in high-intensity contemporary warfare.³³ Indeed, the vehicles selected by the Belgian Land Component mostly had their use in low-intensity combat and peace support operations. The transition from mechanised to motorised affected the structure of the Land Component, as the tank regiments were either abolished or reformed to a medium capacity. Moreover, the light infantry regiment, known as the Para commando regiment, was reduced from three battalions to two.³⁴ The combination of financial-driven reforms with the introduction of new material left the Belgian infantry battalions unable to conduct and sustain high-intensity combat operations. However, it was more than capable of performing the OMLT tasks in combination with guarding the Kabul Airfield.

The Assistant Chief of Staff Operations and Training (ACOS Ops & Trg) is the head of the Staff Department for Operations and Training of the Belgian Ministry of Defence. This position reports to the Chief of Defence and is responsible for the training of the Belgian armed forces and for its operations.³⁵ As such, the ACOS Ops & Trg is responsible for ensuring that every Belgian unit has undergone the proper preparation before its deployment, which is validated by a Certification Exercise (CERTEX). One month into the deployment, the Belgian commanders are obliged to report to ACOS Ops & Trg about the progress of their mission, including lessons identified, operational progress and other issues that might impact a successful tour. This is called the 'X+1' report, which aims to confirm that the pre-deployment training is corroborated with the observations in the mission environment whilst simultaneously allowing for remedial action with regard to the next rotation if necessary.³⁶ By insisting on a relatively short period in theatre before the report is due, ACOS Ops & Trg aspired to draw on these lessons identified before the observations are corrupted by local impressions and learning on the job. At the end of the deployment, the End of Mission report is drafted, which gives a more elaborate account of the progress (or lack thereof) of that particular deployment. A Lessons Learned section is part of the ACOS Ops and Trg, which consists of two field grade officers (majors) and one NCO. When lessons are identified, these are then presented to the ACOS, who, if deemed necessary, assigns a project officer to analyse the problem and present different options for the ACOS to decide on. This project officer will investigate on behalf of the ACOS Ops & Trg, which usually includes subject matter experts from the different components. Biannually, the most important lessons learned are briefed to the Chief of Defence. This briefing ensures that no important issues are stuck



33 Sauer, "Deep Cooperation by Belgian Defence," 16.

34 1 para, <http://www.1para.be/>, accessed 10/05/2022.

35 Academic "ACOS Operations and Training," <https://en-academic.com/dic.nsf/enwiki/7184026>, accessed 27/06/2002.

36 Interview Belgian staff officer lessons learned 35, 24/06/2022.

in bureaucratic processes within the Defence Staff and allows the Chief of Defence to force issues he deems important or overdue.³⁷

5.2 The Decision Path to Kunduz

For Belgium, this symbolic mission would be embodied, in part, by the provision of an OMLT. As the majority of the Belgian parliament was in agreement on answering NATO's call for more OMLTs to facilitate the growing Afghan National Army, the preparations for the first deployments started in earnest. As Belgium was unable, and presumably unwilling, to commit a battalion to an ISAF battlegroup, a partnership with another ISAF-participating state was indispensable, preferably a European partner.³⁸ Several partners were considered. Culturally, logistically and linguistically, the Netherlands was a good option. However, several political parties considered the South of Afghanistan too dangerous to deploy to, as the political risk of losing servicemembers during the deployment was considered too high.³⁹ Moreover, the Dutch OMLT had already paired with the French and Australians, making another foreign OMLT rather redundant.⁴⁰ France had increased its military presence in Afghanistan in 2008, taking responsibility for a battlegroup-sized deployment to both Kapisa province and Surobi district (Kabul province).⁴¹ This presence also included several French OMLTs, and a Belgian contingent reinforcing the French would seem logical, on the same basis as why the Dutch were considered.⁴² The exact reason why the Belgians decided against pairing up with the French has remained undisclosed, although the French loss of ten servicemembers during the Uzbin Valley ambush on 19 August 2008 might have influenced the Belgian decision-making process in favour of Kunduz province.⁴³

Indeed, the German PRT present in Kunduz was a viable option for the Belgians. Not only was Germany a solid European partner, but its army also used the Dingo 2 armoured personnel carrier, making the logistical footprint significantly smaller. Moreover, it could support the Belgians with a relief force—commonly known as a Quick Reaction Force (QRF)—if needed. The latter was an important issue for the Belgians as no Belgian battlegroup was present in

37 Ibid.

38 Belgische Kamer van Volksvertegenwoordigers, Voorstel van Resolutie, DOC 52 0990/005, 8 July 2008.

39 Belgische Kamer van Volksvertegenwoordigers, Voorstel van Resolutie, DOC 52 0990/005, 8 July 2008.

40 Leeuwenburg and Wiltenburg, *Met Geweer en Geduld*.

41 Olivier Schmitt, "Remembering the French War in Afghanistan" (2018), <https://warontherocks.com/2018/09/remembering-the-french-war-in-afghanistan/>, accessed 10/05/2022; Division, *Afghanistan Report 2009*, 8.

42 Interview Belgian staff officer plans division 34, 19/11/2020.

43 Olivier Schmitt, "French Military Adaptation in the Afghan War: Looking Inward or Outward?," *Journal of Strategic Studies* 40, no. 4 (2017): 583, <https://doi.org/10.1080/01402390.2016.1220369>.

Afghanistan to fall back upon, a contingency not anticipated by NATO planners.⁴⁴ During a series of visits to Belgian strategic partners, the nature and intent of the OMLT deployment were reconnoitred by several staff officers. Although the initial NATO demand for an OMLT was for sixteen servicemembers per team, and the Belgian parliament had envisioned twenty personnel per OMLT, the factfinding report called for sixty-nine Belgian servicemembers per OMLT.⁴⁵ The reason for the inflated number could be traced back to NATO's assumption that OMLTs could depend on other national military capacities such as (specialised) medical support, explosive ordnance disposal teams, logistics and other combat support/combat service support utilities. Although the increased number of OMLT members did lead to questions from Army leadership, no modifications were demanded.⁴⁶ Also, the equipment deemed necessary for safe and effective operations, such as personal load-bearing equipment, jammers and radios, were, surprisingly, approved by senior leadership without many difficulties.⁴⁷

5.2.1 OMLT 1: 3 PARA

Shortly after the Belgian intent to participate with an OMLT in the ISAF mission had become known, the 3rd Battalion of the Belgian Parachutist Regiment (3 PARA) was selected as the first unit to be deployed. Together with the 2nd Battalion Commandos (2 Cdo), it formed the elite light brigade of the Land Component. Similar to the United Kingdom and the Netherlands, Belgium also opted for an elite light infantry battalion in the first entry capacity. According to 3 PARA officers, it was indeed a logical choice to deploy 3 PARA first, considering its operational readiness, versatility and training.⁴⁸ Although the final decision to deploy to Afghanistan had yet to be made, the commanding officer of 3 PARA and his staff started analysing the proposed OMLT mission shortly after receiving its warning order in February 2008. Several 3 PARA officers drove to Hohenfels, Germany, to gather information on the OMLT tasks at the Joint Multinational Readiness Centre.⁴⁹ The OMLT task was appreciated by the Belgian Ministry of Defence as one of the most dangerous and mentally demanding tasks because of the continuous threat of improvised explosive devices (IEDs) and the close cooperation with the Afghan Forces—by 2008, the threat of green-on-blue attacks was well known in Brussels. Still, no institutional knowledge had been accumulated by the Belgian armed forces, and as such, 3 PARA officers had to rely on open-source information

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44 Interview Belgian staff officer plans division 34, 19/11/2020.

45 Ibid.

46 Ibid.

47 Interview Belgian OMLT mentor 2, 09/10/2020.

48 OMLT dossier MOD, Annex D- Draft debriefing commanding officer OMLT 1, 19 June 2009, 1.

49 MREx Det OMLT 1 – 3 PARA.

and interpersonal relationships with Dutch, American and French colleagues to build up understanding regarding the OMLT tasks.⁵⁰

Besides the possible deployment to Afghanistan, 3 PARA also was assigned to deploy a company-sized element to Kosovo in the same timeframe as the OMLT deployment was due. Considering the risk assessment for both missions, the commanding officer of 3 PARA, then Lt. Col. Schoenmaekers decided to select the participants for the OMLT deployment on the basis of their experience, their maturity, the appropriate rank and their qualifications, broadly making a dichotomy between senior and junior officers and enlisted men, with the junior staff assigned to the Kosovo operation, and the more experienced paratroopers being assigned to the OMLTs. Moreover, Schoenmaekers made the decision to match the rank of the Afghan mentee with the Belgian mentor. This horizontal approach towards mentoring had its roots in the Belgian military experiences in Africa—the parts of the Belgian Land Component had previously been deployed to states such as Congo, Rwanda and Burundi, resulting in the appreciation that the recipients of mentorship had vastly better acceptance when mentored by their peers or superiors in rank, as opposed to junior officers. This observation was notwithstanding the mentors' age, experience or qualifications, as it was noticed that the nepotist army culture in many African states respected rank more than any other source of authority.⁵¹

The double deployment put some strain on the battalion staff. However, Schoenmaekers was adamant in that he wanted to prevent a “deployment before a deployment,” and he rather trusted the operational readiness of his battalion rather than feeling the need for an intense ten-month pre-deployment training.⁵² The 3 PARA OMLT detachment did attend the OMLT course in Hohenfels integrally, which was well received by the participants. However, there was no Afghan company available to support the training, which was considered a missed opportunity by the Belgian forces.⁵³ The Belgian performance at the JMRC resulted in the Army's assessment that “[3 PARA's] training in Belgium and Germany (and the appropriate lessons learned) [...] will ensure that the Belgian OMLT contingent is prepared to conduct the full spectrum of OMLT missions.”⁵⁴

Although the prospect of combat operations was understated by politicians and policymakers, the inherent risks were well-known by senior army officials. The Belgian Chief of Operations and Training, Lieutenant General Jean-Paul Buyse, conceded to 3 PARA staff that he did not

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50 Interview Belgian OMLT mentor 2, 09/10/2020; Interview Belgian OMLT mentor 4, 26/11/2020.

51 Interview Belgian staff officer plans division 34, 19/11/2020.

52 Interview Belgian OMLT commanding officer 1, 04/11/2020; Interview Belgian OMLT mentor 4, 26/11/2020.

53 Interview Belgian OMLT mentor 3, 08/01/2021.

54 Powerpoint presentation OMLT 1 MREx Brief 11/12/2022.

expect everybody to return unscathed from this mission.⁵⁵ Still, the directives from the political level insisted that Belgian servicemembers would only serve in the ‘second line,’ implying that the Belgian OMLT would keep away from the frontline and, as such, would have less risk of being injured or killed.⁵⁶ The fallacy of such statements during counterinsurgency operations had not infused the political level, and as such, it was disseminated to the tactical level. Indeed, the Belgian Operations Order for ISAF, as drafted by the Chief of Defence, stated that “the OMLT will not actively engage in combat operations. They will at all moments refrain from operating in contact with the insurgents unless required so to guarantee the success of the mission or to safeguard the security of the OMLT.”⁵⁷ Moreover, “all provisions are [to be] made to prevent night operations” and “if possible, mentors will operate from their vehicles. If dismounted operations are necessary, provisions will be made to ensure that vehicles are in close vicinity, providing, if need be, shelter and/or fire support.”⁵⁸ Lastly, an important caveat was included that stated that “the OMLT will NOT mentor at platoon level,” restricting its interventions to Coy and Bn level. The senior mentor may always, as a result of the military decision-making process and taking into account such elements as mission, terrain and the security of his personnel, decide to engage this OMLT at the platoon level. This, however, will be an exception to the rule.⁵⁹

Eventually, the definitive ‘go’ for the mission was given by the Belgian government by late December 2008, and on 5 January, the first Belgian OMLTs were deployed to Kabul.⁶⁰ The mission statement Schoenmaekers was provided with stated that his tasks included “to coach, teach and mentor ANA units, provide the conduit for liaison and command and control and when required support the operational planning and employment of the ANA unit to which they are aligned in order to support the development of a self-sufficient, competent and professional ANA.”⁶¹ Schoenmaekers interpreted this assignment into “to improve the level of the kandak that has been assigned to us in all aspects, and to build a working relationship by our continuous presence, by sharing our expertise and by sharing risks in a responsible manner.”⁶²

The first part of the initial OMLT deployment was to occur in Kabul, as a new kandak was to be trained at the KMTC by the Belgian OMLT in cooperation with other NATO forces

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55 Interview Belgian OMLT commanding officer 1, 04/11/2020; Interview Belgian OMLT mentor 2, 09/10/2020.

56 Interview Belgian OMLT commanding officer 1, 04/11/2020; Interview Belgian staff officer plans division 34, 19/11/2020.

57 CHOD OPERATION ORDER FOR (BEL) CONTRIBUTION TO ISAF, Annex G to CHODOPORDER FOR ISAF Jan 2009, p. G-4-G-5.

58 Ibid., p. G-5.

59 Ibid., p. G-4.

60 P. Defrancq, “OMLT 1 Kaboel-Kunduz 3 PARA in Operatie,” *Paracommando Regimental Gazette* (2009), 14.

61 Draft Debriefing Comd OMLT 1 19 June 2009, Annex D, p. A-3.

62 Ibid., p. A-3-4.

participating in the training of the Afghan Army. The first contingent of OMLT 1 consisted of a sixteen-strong group, which constituted the core of the OMLT, i.e., the actual trainers as envisioned in the nineteen-strong standard NATO-OMLT. From January to March 2009, the Belgians trained their Afghan charges on basic infantry and road-move TTPs.⁶³ The rationale behind this scheme was that the road move to Kunduz would be prepared as well as possible, with the actual road move acting as some sort of informal finalisation of the training efforts. However, highly impressed with the actual performance of the ANA kandak trained by the Belgians, the US decided to reassign the kandak to Mazar-e-Sharif, leaving the Belgian OMLT without its kandak.⁶⁴ Instead, the Belgians were assigned 2/2/209 kandak, already present in Kunduz.⁶⁵ As the road move from Kabul to Kunduz did overlap with the route to Mazar-e-Sharif, both the Afghan kandak and the Belgian OMLT were committed to the same convoy, with part of the Belgian OMLT accompanying the kandak to Mazar-e-Sharif in order to conduct a handover-takeover with the receiving mentor team before joining the main Belgian effort in Kunduz.⁶⁶

Upon arrival, 1 BEL OMLT took charge of the mentoring of 2/2/209 kandak, which was previously mentored by another NATO OMLT. The Belgian OMLT assessed that its predecessors mentored from “within the wire,” implying that the OMLTs would not accompany the ANA on patrols, leaving the ANA to operate in the field without direct NATO support or liaisons.⁶⁷ Also, with parts of the previous OMLT already rotated out of Afghanistan, the handover-takeover was considered to be a poor effort.⁶⁸ Indeed, the Belgians were too reluctant to adhere to this approach and intended to conduct operations with the ANA in a partnered way, breaking with its predecessor’s *modus operandum*.

OMLT 1’s approach to tactics, however, was quite in contrast with the political intent of participating in a low-risk training mission in a relatively safe Afghan province. Infantry battalions, in particular, are trained to close in with and kill the enemy rather than to stay behind and advise from a distance. Moreover, parachutists or air assault units frequently have an averseness to the use of vehicles, as vehicles are perceived as death traps; light infantry, rather, fights dismounted. The caveats provided by the Chief of Defence thus went against the very nature of elite light infantry, and with the exemption given to the commanding

63 Powerpoint presentation OMLT 1 MREx Brief 11/12/2022.

64 Defrancq, “OMLT 1 Kaboel-Kunduz 3 PARA in Operatie,” 16.

65 Interview Belgian OMLT commanding officer 1, 04/11/2020.

66 Defrancq, “OMLT 1 Kaboel-Kunduz 3 PARA in Operatie,” 16.

67 Interview Belgian OMLT mentor 2, 09/10/2020.

68 Interview Belgian OMLT mentor 4, 26/11/2020.

officer to allow platoon-level mentoring and dismounted operations by exception, this quickly became the rule during OMLT 1 tenure.⁶⁹

The Belgian OMLT tactics revolved around the principle that the OMLT would be essentially a shadow cadre. This implied that the company mentor would be paired with the ANA company commander and that the NCOs would be upfront with the ANA platoon leadership. This would allow the OMLT to have situational awareness and for the OMLT CO to have a degree of control over the ANA via his platoon mentors even when the ANA CO would move to his command post to a tactically less sound location or in case of signal problems. Moreover, this would lead to information coming to the OMLT CO from his personnel up front rather than via the ANA chain of command and then through an interpreter, resulting in a slower and less accurate creation of situational awareness and understanding. Essentially, the OMLT would operate as a redundancy to the nascent Afghan Army command structure.

The Belgian OMLT's smallest unit of action was a seven-man strong team, supplemented with an interpreter. This team consisted of an officer in charge, a senior NCO, a junior NCO, two enlisted drivers/signaller, and two enlisted machine gunners/combat medics. Initially, CS and CSS companies were paired with a five-man OMLT, but this was quickly abandoned as it became clear during a firefight that this would constitute an understaffed OMLT team.⁷⁰ The OMLTs were double-hatted; that is to say, the OMLT leadership would not only mentor its Afghan counterparts but also were responsible for commanding their own subordinates and performing their own duties as expected.⁷¹

Over time, the TTPs of the OMLT adapted. It was concluded that two teams would be the minimum for effective mentoring. An ANA company would thus be accompanied by fourteen Belgian paras.⁷² The organisation would be divided into an overall commander and a ground manoeuvre commander. Adhering to a basic tactical plan, the ANA company would advance over a recognisable line in the terrain, for instance, a road, two platoons up front, and one in the rear. Both front platoons would be mentored by a three-man strong Belgian OMLT section (team lead, junior NCO, gunner/medic). This allowed the overall OMLT commander to have mentoring and forward observing capability upfront. In the rear, a sergeant-major

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69 Interview Belgian OMLT mentor 4, 26/11/2020; Interview Belgian OMLT mentor 3, 08/01/2021; Interview Belgian OMLT mentor 2, 09/10/2020; Interview Belgian OMLT mentor 5, 05/02/2021.

70 Draft Debriefing Comd OMLT 1 19 June 2009, Annex D, p. A-1; Interview Belgian OMLT mentor 2, 09/10/2020.

71 Interview Belgian OMLT mentor 2, 09/10/2020; Interview Belgian OMLT mentor 4, 26/11/2020.

72 Powerpoint presentation "Overview Missions (BEL) OMLT 1 Apr–Jun '09," personal archive P. Defrancq, undated, Interview Belgian OMLT mentor 2, 09/10/2020.

would command all vehicles, giving the OMLT commander a ‘national manoeuvre element’ to directly order to a place of necessity and act as a base of fire or extraction element.⁷³

The rationale for this mentoring tactic had its foundation in ANA tactical deficits. Initially, the ANA were prone to huddle together or move in a single file formation instead of a deployed formation and thus dominant to any enemy upfront.⁷⁴ The platoon mentors were meant to guide the ANA to their proper formation. Secondly, when under fire, the ANA were prone to go firm and return fire. The Belgian OMLT found it hard to get the ANA to combine fire and manoeuvre, but the reserve element and the vehicle detachment, in combination with the indirect fire capacity provided by the para’s 60 mm mortars, allowed the OMLT CO to manoeuvre even when the first two platoons were fixed, or with an absent ANA leadership.⁷⁵ In this way, the two-team company mentoring was sufficient for the Belgians to have a critical mass of fighting power for ANA-independent manoeuvres.

These observations were made by the Belgian OMLT after a series of incidents at the beginning of June 2009. As the threat levels in Kunduz increased, Belgian service members were involved in combat on 9 June, 10 June and 15 June.⁷⁶ On 9 June, a joint Afghan-Belgian patrol was ambushed as it left a village in the Kanam region. As the ANA and Belgians returned fire, close air support was called in, which allowed the ANA and OMLT to break contact and return to base. One ANA soldier was injured during the ambush, and a number of vehicles suffered damage, including a Belgian vehicle. The next day, the ANA QRF was ordered to support another ANA battalion of the same brigade, which was conducting an operation in the vicinity of Qazaq. As the patrol consisted of Afghans, Belgians and the US/Hungarian OMLT supporting 3/2/209 kandak, the deficiencies of the command structure were highlighted, as no guidance was given by the ANA brigade level, and no command relation existed between the OMLTs of different nationalities. As such, the Belgian OMLT found itself isolated on one side of a river, coordinating a brigade-level operation.⁷⁷

On 15 June, a Belgian patrol was engaged by insurgents in the Tapa Borida region. Importantly, the Belgians usually deployed two OMLT teams, with the OMLT that was advising the ANA company commander designated as the overall commander. The position of overall commanding officer rotated between the OMLT teams. During the incident at Tapa Borida, the overall commander happened to be a young first lieutenant, with the supporting OMLT under the command of a *Kapitein-commandant*, a uniquely Belgian rank between captain and

73 Interview Belgian OMLT mentor 2, 09/10/2020.

74 Interview Belgian OMLT mentor 2, 09/10/2020; Interview Belgian OMLT mentor 3, 08/01/2021.

75 Defrancq, “OMLT 1 Kaboel-Kunduz 3 PARA in Operatie,” 18.

76 Operations and Training Tracking Sheet, TIC Reports OMLT 1, Summary, Annex A, 21 June 2009. Belgian Military Archives. p. 3/8.

77 Ibid. p. 3/8.

major, although NATO considers both *Kapitein-commandant* and major to be an OF3 equivalent. During this case, the more senior officer was subservient to a first lieutenant.

During the patrol, ANA platoons were positioned north and south of a road, moving in a deployed fashion due to the high-risk assessment. The first part of the patrol was rather uneventful, but during the march back to the vehicles, the ANA and OMLT were engaged from multiple positions by small arms and RPGs. During the engagement, two ANA soldiers were killed, with another two and a Belgian NCO wounded. As the ANA and OMLT returned fire, air support was summoned, which consisted of a pair of F15 fighters and a pair of A10s. The NATO aircraft made several strafing runs on the insurgents' positions, allowing the ANA and OMLT to disengage. During the six-hour contact, a third Belgian OMLT and eighty ANA joined to fight on the orders of the CO of 3 PARA. This was then followed by a German platoon acting as the PRT QRF.⁷⁸

The engagement led to a number of observations. First, the Belgian command structure was prone to friction, as senior officers were put under the orders of lower-ranked officers. Although, in this case, this did not lead to additional casualties, the unity of effort had become exposed as junior and senior officers were not in agreement with the proposed course of action.⁷⁹ Secondly, ANA leadership proved to be unable to function under fire, with the OMLT bemoaning the ANA leadership's lack of situational awareness. In addition, after the initial contact, the ANA platoon leader refused to lead his platoon, which resulted in the Belgian OMLT officer taking over. It was also reported by the Belgians that one hour into the fight, "the (ANA) Rifle Coys stopped fighting due to resignation."⁸⁰ Thirdly, both the ANA and the Belgians experienced ammunition shortages, the latter due to the prolonged firefight, with the ANA's ammunition problems compounded due to a lack of fire discipline. Lastly, the cooperation and command and control structure between the Belgian and German subunits left room for improvements, as the German QRF and the Belgian OMLT were not integrated as a unit, causing some friction during the contact.⁸¹

The Belgian observations and after-action analysis led to a number of recommendations to the ACOS Operations and Training. First of all, a remotely operated weapon system was requested. This system was quickly implemented on the light-wheeled vehicles of the OMLT

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78 Verslag van Militaire Politie, Onderwerp: Aanslag op Belgische OMLT en ANA, LOC BANANA, HAKIMBUY, in coördinaten 42 S VF 822 689, 19 Juni 2009.

79 Interview Belgian OMLT mentor 5, 05/02/2021; Verslag van Militaire Politie, Onderwerp: Aanslag op Belgische OMLT en ANA, LOC BANANA, HAKIMBUY, in coördinaten 42 S VF 822 689, 19 June 2009.

80 Operations and Training Tracking Sheet, TIC Reports OMLT 1, Summary, Annex A, 21 June 2009. Belgian Military Archives, p. 3/8.

81 Operations and Training Tracking Sheet, TIC Reports OMLT 1, Summary, Annex A, 21 June 2009. Belgian Military Archives, p. 3/8; Interview Van Poecke.

as it allowed the Belgians to return accurate fire from a protected position.⁸² Also, this Remotely Operated Self-defence System (ROSS) allowed the Belgians to engage the enemy over longer distances. This was important as the Belgian forces were engaged at the maximum range of the enemy's weapons, which limited the Belgian's ability to close in and kill the enemy. As the Land Component had just changed its approach to shooting to short-range engagements—the 'new technique combat shooting'⁸³—the recommendation to return to long-range marksmanship was a recurring theme at the End of Mission reports, which was subsequently implemented.⁸⁴ This last observation—the friction between the Germans and Belgians during combat—led to the expansion of the Belgian detachment with a liaison officer to the German Operations Centre, who was assigned to ensure that the Germans and Belgians were on the same page when a Troops in Contact situation occurred.⁸⁵

The incident on 15 June, which included a Belgian casualty, also caused a shockwave within the Ministry of Defence, as combat operations and casualties differed from the narrative of a 'training operation.' Within days a special investigation was ordered to be conducted by a delegation of Belgian officers. During the investigation, the Belgian OMLT was ordered to suspend any participation in ANA operations and to perform a 'reverse transfer of authority,' essentially placing the Belgian OMLT outside the ISAF order of battle for the time being.⁸⁶ The investigation was a cause for ire amongst 3 PARA personnel, as they felt they had to defend their actions to "a number of staff officers with little knowledge of combat operations."⁸⁷ Despite 3 PARA's conviction on the necessity of mentoring on platoon level and below, the guidelines and caveats for the Belgian OMLTs were sharpened to include a prohibition on any mentoring other than company and battalion level operations during night-time and dismounted operations.⁸⁸ This ban was an elaboration on the earlier guidelines that were restrictive but left some room to manoeuvre the commanding officer. Moreover, a doubling of the ammunition load was ordered, as well as a reiteration that Belgian service members were to distance themselves from the front line.⁸⁹ Ironically, the limitations and caveats were contradictory to the lessons identified by OMLT 1 themselves. Besides the validation of

82 Interview Belgian OMLT commanding officer 1, 04/11/2020.

83 Literally: Nieuwe Techniek Gevechtsschieten (NTGS).

84 Interview Belgian staff officer lessons learned 35, 24/06/2022.

85 Ibid.

86 Kabinet Chef Defensie, Onderwerp: Richtlijnen OMLT, 17/06/2009.

87 Interview Belgian OMLT mentor 5, 05/02/2021.

88 Armoured infantry units make a distinction between mounted operations, dismounted operations and operations on foot, the difference between the last two types of operation being that in that during dismounted operations, the vehicles are supposed to be able to support the dismounted personnel.

89 Kabinet Chef Defensie, Onderwerp: Richtlijnen OMLT, 17/06/2009.

their low-level tactics and the necessity of physical fitness, the OMLT identified the necessity to “work dismounted” and to work with “a minimum of two teams OMLT.”⁹⁰

In addition to the formal narrowing of the operational freedom of the OMLTs, the series of incidents also functioned as an incentive to further clarify the command structure between a patrol and the QRF, whether it is German or Afghan. This was done by ways of a fragmentation order, which was drafted by the Belgian S3 officer shortly after the 15 June incident.⁹¹ Although this order functioned as a stop-gap measure, the command and control deficiencies were greater than the coordination between a QRF and OMLT/ANA patrol, leading the Chief of Defence, General Delcour, to notify NATO by ways of formal writing to express his concerns. To ensure a smoother flow of information and “a satisfactory overall coordination between ISAF, ANA and the (BEL) OMLT,”⁹² Delcour ordered additional Belgian staff officers to be deployed to the German-led PRT and Brigade OMLT in Kunduz.⁹³ Importantly, Delcour also addressed the ANA’s lacklustre performance in the field, as he lamented ANA’s leadership, equipment and staffing. In his letter, Delcour stated that the capability milestone that the ANA brigade had been granted was a gross overstatement and that the ANA capabilities were, in fact, far lower than formally indicated, resulting in the ANA being “committed to [sic] operations for which they are clearly not ready and consequently putting mission accomplishment, their own security and that of the OMLT at risk.”⁹⁴ Delcour’s statements were a generalisation of the OMLTs observation, whose harsh conclusions included a statement such as “the ANA stops fighting,” “the ANA staff does not keep the overview,” and “the ANA is unwilling to manoeuvre.”⁹⁵ The next rotation was immediately confronted by the operational limitations that were ordered by the Belgian Ministry of Defence, but as they were nearing the end of their allotted timeslot, it had little impact on 3 PARAs operations. Their successors, however, were immediately impacted by the new regulations. From 1 July onwards, the French-speaking Chasseurs Ardennais battalion would succeed the Paras in mentoring the Afghan National Army.

5.2.2 OMLT 2: *The Chasseurs Ardennais*

The selection of the Chasseurs Ardennais (ChA) as the battalion to succeed 3 PARA had its roots in the planning cell of the Belgian Land Component, as the lead planner of the Belgian deployment would become the commanding officer of the ChA battalion shortly before its envisioned deployment. Then Lt. Col. Gérard thus planned the ChA shortly after he assumed

90 Powerpoint presentation “Overview Missions (BEL) OMLT 1 Apr–Jun ’09,” personal archive P. Defrancq, undated.

91 S. Schoenmaekers, Frago 007-09, Coordinating instructions for the use of the QRF, 19/06/2009.

92 Delcour, C.-H., ISAF – Report of the (BEL) Contact Team deployed to the (BEL) OMLT in RC-N, 2.

93 Ibid., 2.

94 Ibid., 2.

95 Powerpoint presentation “Overview Missions (BEL) OMLT 1 Apr–Jun ’09,” personal archive P. Defrancq, undated.

command to deploy to Afghanistan. Like 3 PARA, the ChA battalion would be split between the OMLT deployment in Kunduz and a less-intensive deployment, guarding the Kabul International Airport (KAIA). Drawing from the experiences of 3 PARA—Gérard had regular contact with Schoenmaekers during the preparatory phase—Gérard also opted to deploy his most experienced personnel to Kunduz, assigning the more junior troops to KAIA.

In the preparatory phase, Gérard put an emphasis on the cohesion of his battalion but also on the linguistic skills of his cadre. The former was considered important as the ChA would be divided over both the OMLT and KAIA deployment, but Gérard also had to detach enlisted personnel to reinforce the ISAF 17 and ISAF 18 deployments to support the 1/3 Lancers tank battalion, which was short on personnel as it had to perform dismounted guard duty. Gérard wanted to avoid a sense of elitism within his battalion, as he was well aware that handpicking NCOs and officers from all subunits of the battalion would induce a sense of superiority *casu quo* inferiority. Therefore, he opted to assign his personnel broadly along company lines, augmenting the OMLT company where needed but still avoiding broad dissent over selection issues. By selecting the most experienced company for the OMLT task, he could still draw on (mostly) experienced officers and enlisted.

The linguistic issue has its roots in the francophone background of the ChA battalion. As Belgium Land Component Battalions are spread around the country, the common tongue is naturally either one of Belgium's dominant languages.⁹⁶ In the Belgian armed forces, only officers are required to be bilingual, with the required proficiency increasing with rank. Still, junior Francophone officers are only required to hold a basic knowledge of Flemish, and only general officers are required to be fully bilingual. Enlisted personnel are thus exempted from mastering a second language and are generally not able to communicate professionally in the other dominant Belgian language. Moreover, Francophone officers generally have more issues learning English as the languages are unrelated, unlike Flemish and English—both Germanic languages. As the communication with the Afghan mentees would be through an English-speaking interpreter, Gérard made a serious effort to raise the proficiency in English across his OMLT selection.

Lastly, through a series of interactions with French and German OMLTs, Gérard based his training programme on three pillars: to act as a mentor/coach, to act as a liaison and to be able to enable support. These pillars provided the pre-deployment training structure of the ChA. Moreover, Gérard pre-deployed one of his officers to Kunduz as early as April in order to gain as much situational awareness as possible. As 3 PARA only deployed to Kunduz from April 2009 onwards—the first rotation spent its first months in Kabul—any earlier

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96 German is also an official Belgian language, but it is only spoken by a small minority in the east of Belgium, and no German-speaking units serve in the Belgian Land Component.

was impossible, and the 2nd rotation's reconnaissance could only take place at the end of May 2009. Still, Gérard was very content with his decision to pre-deploy an officer, as the feedback that was received from Kunduz further guided the ChA pre-deployment training programme.⁹⁷

The series of pre-deployment exercises did have an effect on the battalion, as the six-month preparation phase was considered to be a "mission before a mission"; however, it did reach its goals to prepare the OMLT mostly to the satisfaction of its commander. Still, Gérard identified several issues during the battalion's preparation, including lacking vehicles and radios to "train as you fight," and he had to deal with a significant personnel shortage, reporting a 68 per cent staffing. The NATO course in Hohenfels, Germany, and the battalions' effort to acquaint themselves with American doctrine and TTPs with regards to counterinsurgency, were drawn from the American Field Manual 3-24. Moreover, T.E. Lawrence's adage "better the Arabs do it tolerably than that you do it perfectly" was integrated into the Belgian's operational thinking during the Hohenfels field training exercise.

During the deployment, the ChA thus aimed to incorporate "Afghan ownership" with regard to operations, leaving the initiative and responsibility of patrols with the ANA.⁹⁸ The relationship between mentor and mentee was considered to be paramount, and as such, the Belgian officers invested much of their time in building rapport, although it took "two months" for the kandak commander to consider his mentors' point of view.⁹⁹ The Belgian ability to bring fire and air support to the field of battle—a direct reference to the third pillar, 'enabling support,' to which the ChA pre-deployment training had focused—acted as a catalyst for the ANA to accept the Belgian mentoring.¹⁰⁰ The ChA also incorporated a more "participative method," indicating that the ANA and OMLT jointly prepared and executed the operations. Lastly, the Belgians preferred a "train the trainer" approach, attempting to incorporate a heightened sense of professionalism within the ANA NCO and officer corps.¹⁰¹ This approach caused friction with the US Special Forces present in Kunduz, who was also cooperating with the ANA. However, Gérard assessed the US involvements to be "US-led," interacting with the ANA "in a directive way," with the US ODAs "training the ANA the way we do in our respective armies," indicating an attempt to enforce Western army structures and procedures.¹⁰² The US Special Force's approach to degrading the insurgent's capability was at odds with the Belgian aim to build up a more professional Afghan Army. The Belgian advice



97 P. Gérard, Rapport de preparation OMLT 2.

98 FragO Note "BEL OMLT Inputs Regarding to Partnership," 11 December 2009.

99 Interview Belgian OMLT mentor 8, 27/12/2020.

100 Ibid.

101 FragO Note "BEL OMLT Inputs Regarding to Partnership," 11 December 2009.

102 Ibid.

was thus to avoid partnering with the US Special Forces contingent. However, another ISAF regular battalion was not present in Kunduz to partner with, and as such little partnering could be conducted.¹⁰³

Still, the ChA OMLT and the ANA conducted a large number of patrols in Kunduz. During their tenure, the Belgian OMLT was engaged a number of times without resulting in Belgian casualties. The total number of contacts was estimated to be “around 10 to 12” by the commanding officer, and it included small arms attacks, RPG engagements and a Suicide Vehicle-Born IED, to which Belgian OMLT responded well, according to their commander.¹⁰⁴ During the OMLT 1 tenure, a red-card holder was present to oversee Belgian operations. However, unlike the previous rotation, this RCH was integrated into the German-led brigade OMLT as a special adviser and, as such, was present in Kunduz instead of Mazar-e-Sharif. By the end of 2009, the German Brigade OMLT also included several Belgian staff officers. Although a good rapport was established between the Germans and the Belgians, the language issues resurfaced as the German staff communicated in German, necessitating the selection of officers that were able to communicate fluently in that language.¹⁰⁵ In some cases, this was easily overcome as the more senior Belgian officers had often worked in Soest, Germany, as part of the Belgian brigade, which was stationed there during the Cold War. Although the Belgian presence in Soest was terminated in 1994, many older officers still had a good working knowledge of the German language.

5.2.3 OMLT 3: 2 Commando

As the Belgian OMLT involvement entered its second year and its third rotation, the pioneer efforts of the first rotations allowed the 2 Commando (2 Cdo) battalion to prepare for deployment in a more routine fashion compared to the first iterations. 2 Commando is the Francophone sister battalion of 3 PARA, also part of the elite light brigade and with a highly similar training compendium. The commanding officer of the battalion, Lt. Col. Christophe Closset, was able to make three reconnaissance trips to Kunduz, including two with his key officers. Closset learned that 2 Cdo would mentor 1/2/209 kandak, a different kandak than the 2/2/209 kandak that was mentored by the ChA. This made part of the HOTO redundant, as the knowledge of the battalion’s characteristics could not be transferred to 2 Cdo. Moreover, Closset stated that he received little guidance from Brussels on his exact tasks and that most of his understanding of the OMLT deployment was gained through the official reporting from OMLT 1 and 2 and ISAF reporting on the OMLT.¹⁰⁶ Based on the general order by the Chief of Defence, Closset reformulated his tasks as

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103 Ops evaluatie van de opdracht bij einde zending door Bart Laurent, 5–6.

104 Interview Belgian OMLT commanding officer 6, 27/11/2020; P. Gérard, Rapport X+1 mission OMLT 2, 6.

105 Ops evaluatie van de opdracht bij einde zending door Bart Laurent, 5/8.

106 Interview Belgian OMLT commanding officer 10, 25/01/2021.

(BEL) OMLT 3 will: coach, assist, mentor and if necessary teach 1/2/209 Inf kandak in the planning, preparation, execution, and follow-up of operations and training activities IOT improve its capabilities in all functional areas. Also, (BEL) OMLT 3 will request and support the employment of ISAF CS and CSS Elm, i.e. CAS, Air mobility and MEDEVAC and liaise and coordinate with RC-N, 2/209 (ANA) Bde OMLT, PRT KUNDUZ, (US) LST, and appropriate designated ISAF or ANSF partnering unit.¹⁰⁷

Closset was able to make a running start, as 2 Cdo was familiar with Afghanistan since the battalion had been deployed to Kabul the previous year. The Commando battalion had a high level of operational readiness and was ready to deploy. 2 Cdo went through three months of additional pre-deployment training, which was complemented with the by now customary Hohenfels OMLT training curriculum.

After 2 Cdo took over from the ChA, Closset and his team again attempted to build rapport between the Belgians and the ANA. Closset also made an effort to acquaint himself with Dari, which enhanced his status as a mentor to the ANA commander.¹⁰⁸ 2 Cdo focused during the deployment on initial capacity development, which included assisting, coaching, and mentoring 1/2/209 kandak in the planning, preparation, execution and follow-up of operations and training activities.¹⁰⁹

Under Closset's leadership, the Belgians considered the ANA to be their "brothers in arms in the field," and this approach to mentoring attributed to the standing of the OMLT.¹¹⁰ This attitude towards mentoring took the rekindled 3 PARA's approach with regard to the proximity to the front. Indeed, 2 Cdo shared 3 PARA's position that mentoring had to be done in person at the lowest tactical (platoon) levels instead of from the vehicles at the company level. 2 Cdo thus again deviated from the nationally imposed restrictions: "[We were] fighting on foot with vehicles in fire support at a distance. The most important reason for this was that we did not want to give the impression that we were hiding behind the vehicles."¹¹¹ Operations that were considered to be overly risky or a blatant breach of the national caveats were rejected by Belgian leadership. The presence of the Red Card Holder (RCH) also allowed Closset to save face with the Afghans, as any operation that could not be supported by the Belgian OMLT could be attributed to either the RCH or Brussels, avoiding any suspicion on the Afghan side on Belgian willingness to share operational risk.¹¹²

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¹⁰⁷ Excerpt from Initial Opord OMLT, personal archive Belgian OMLT commanding officer 10

¹⁰⁸ Interview Belgian OMLT commanding officer 10, 25/01/2021.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid.

¹¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹¹ Ibid.

¹¹² Interview Belgian commanding officer 7, 03/11/2020; Interview Belgian OMLT commanding officer 10, 25/01/2021.

2 Cdo participated in a total of fifty-six patrols during its six months in theatre, which resulted in a total of thirteen contacts with opposing forces.¹¹³ The most significant incident of the tour, however, was the result of a blue-on-blue incident. On 2 April 2010, six ANA soldiers belonging to 1/2/209 kandak were killed by German fire during a joint German/Afghan/OMLT operation. Hours earlier, three German soldiers had been killed in action fighting insurgents.¹¹⁴ The German troops, on edge after losing three of their own, misidentified two ANA-operated civilian cars approaching its position and opened fire.¹¹⁵ After this incident, the relationship between ANA and the German PRT severely deteriorated, as the ANA held the German PRT responsible. As a result, joint operations were suspended for a period, and the Belgian OMLT—although not blamed by the ANA—had to navigate between these tense relations.¹¹⁶

The Belgian OMLT detachment, both at the kandak as well as the brigade levels, was by now highly critical of its surroundings. Closset observed a number of ANA shortfalls concerning their proficiency in primary military skills.¹¹⁷ Amongst these, the ANA was considered incapable of adequately planning an operation, as they lacked a planning process. They could not coordinate actions, and there was no mission command. “[There were] many non-sense [sic] decisions and unrealistic orders issued by higher echelons.”¹¹⁸ In addition, the ANA had a poor intelligence process. They were also not proactive and would rush into action. No training policy, logistic architecture, medical support, tactical orders, or decent personnel management. Finally, clear and hold operations—especially concerning the latter—did not exist within ANSF.¹¹⁹

Moreover, the friendly fire incident on 2 April confirmed the existing views on the German forces present in Kunduz. Looking back, Closset made some scathing remarks on German military proficiency:

the operational cooperation with the German troops of PRT KDZ was **very poor** (bold in original text), and I really mean it. The Germans were indeed very traditional soldiers (even if they were airborne and/or cavalry), applying very classical tactics despite the very special environment of a COIN operation, which proved to be truly dramatic on many occasions (regarding this, they not only suffered quite a few KIA because of their lack

113 Evaluatieverslag End of Mission, 3.

114 <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-afghanistan-violence-idUSTRE6320Cl20100403>, accessed 10/06/2022.

115 <https://www.ctvnews.ca/german-troops-accidentally-kill-6-afghan-soldiers-1.498677>, accessed 10/06/2022.

116 End of Mission Report OMLT_10_01, 6; Evaluation de la mission OMLT Bde et SNR/RCH, 5.

117 Interview Belgian OMLT commanding officer 10, 25/01/2021.

118 Ibid.

119 End of Mission Report OMLT_10_01, 6.

of professionalism, but they also killed six ANA soldiers of my kandak during a night operation in the Kunduz region, in a BLUE ON GREEN incident). They had no previous partnering experience and, strangely enough, considered themselves true gung-ho warriors, which they weren't at all. More often than not, they were just a bunch of undisciplined cowboys and mavericks, many of them with openly racist behaviours and words, poorly commanded in the field by two junior officers without sufficient experience (none of them had previous combat experience but didn't have the wisdom to learn how best to adapt). Above the tactical units, the PRT was supposed to play the role of regimental-level staff, but it globally performed **very badly** (bold in original text). Poorly commanded by too many arrogant but incompetent officers who were obviously not at their place in such an environment.¹²⁰

This assessment of the German PRT was corroborated by other Belgian officers in earlier rotations, whose criticism included a lack of planning, vision and risk avoidance.¹²¹

The soured relations between the Germans and the ANA thus prohibited joint operations, and only after the German Colonel parleyed with the ANA commander did the interaction between the partners normalise to some extent. Still, a Belgian officer attached to the Brigade OMLT stated that some ANA forces were keen to exact revenge. An IED strike on a German vehicle that caused six Germans to be killed in action two weeks later, according to one source, hinted at foul play on the ANA's behalf.¹²² Although Belgian troops were involved in this incident, it was not reported to Brussels as it was a Brigade effort, and no Belgians were injured or killed.¹²³ Still, the German response to the incident reiterated the criticism of the quality of the German forces in Kunduz, as it was reported that the "German conscript forces froze and did not know what to do."¹²⁴

As 2 Cdo's tour ended, the relations between ISAF forces and the ANA had room for improvement, and although Closset reported an excellent relationship with the ANA, this was not the case with either the German PRT or the Brigade OMLT. The next rotation, the Battalion *Bevrijding-5 Linie*, led by Lt. Col. Van Vlerken, thus ameliorated the relations between its partners.

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120 Email correspondence Belgian OMLT commanding officer 10, 25/01/2021.

121 Email correspondence G. Gabriels to S. Dutron 02/09/2009.

122 Interview Belgian OMLT mentor 12, 10/11/2020.

123 Ibid.

124 Ibid.

5.2.4 OMLT 4: Bataljon Bevrijding / 5 Linie

For the Dutch-speaking Bataljon Bevrijding / 5 Linie (Bvr/5Li), the preparation for the OMLT deployment followed by now familiar lines, including the national pre-deployment training, the NATO OMLT exercise in Hohenfels and the in-theatre training in Afghanistan. Informally, the commanders of OMLT 1 and OMLT 2 shared their experience with the Bvr/5Li battalion, especially 3 PARA's experience, which included combat footage of that rotation as a part of the preparation.¹²⁵ The comprehensiveness of the OMLT task was also recognised, as Van Vlerken indicated that the OMLT would constitute "supporting the ANA Battalion as a coach in just about every functional domain."¹²⁶ Besides looking to its Belgian predecessors, Bvr/5Li also looked to incorporate the lessons learned by the Dutch Battlegroup and OMLT, with officers of both sharing their experiences with the Belgian 4th rotation during its pre-deployment training.¹²⁷ This complemented a reconnaissance in February 2010 and an increasing collection of lessons learned by ETTs, OMLTs and counterinsurgency literature.¹²⁸

Van Vlerken, like all commanding officers, had received his orders in the general operations order and, after analysing his assignment, restated his orders for his subordinates. He considered that mentorship would incorporate giving advice and assistance to the ANA in order to make them "**independent**" (bold in original), which would include training and teaching before, as well as during, operations.¹²⁹ In his mission brief to the battalion, Van Vlerken considered his mission to "support de [sic] development of a self-sufficient [sic], competent and professional 2/2/209 (ANA) Infantry KANDAK."¹³⁰ He considered his implied tasks were "to coach and mentor all functional areas within the 2/2/209 (ANA) kandak for continued development of capabilities, including staff procedures for operations at infantry Coy, infantry Battalion and higher level, to support operational planning and tactical employment of 2/2/209 kandak, including planning, assessing, supporting and the execution of combat operations." Moreover, the order specified its liaison tasks to include "requesting and supporting the employment of ISAF combat enablers, i.e. fire support, CAS and MEDEVAC, and liaising and coordinating with the appropriate R[egional]C[ommand] and partnering units."¹³¹

Although Van Vlerken's order included the planning and execution of combat operations, he again deviated from his predecessors in that he adhered to his orders not to mentor below the

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125 Interview Belgian OMLT mentor 15, 03/12/2020.

126 B. Van Vlerken, "OMLT – Mentor in Afghanistan," *Belgisch Militair Tijdschrift* (2011), 111.

127 Zie: Bedankbrieven Tak 3 OMLT 4, personal archive B. van Vlerken

128 Personal archive B. van Vlerken.

129 Powerpoint presentation B. Van Vlerken "Operational Mentoring and Liaison team 1/2/209 KANDAK."

130 Richtlijnen Tak 3, PrepO OMLT I/4, undated, personal archive B. Van Vlerken.

131 Ibid.

company level. As the US staff in Hohenfels propagated mentoring at the section and platoon level, Van Vlerken had a minor altercation with the US trainers, as his orders prohibited this. Moreover, Van Vlerken was also unwilling to expose his forces to unnecessary risks as he stated that “Afghanistan is not a country worth dying for.”¹³²

During the execution, the Belgian OMLT was engaged in a ‘troops in contact’ situation several times during the first month, although no injuries or damage was sustained.¹³³ From 1 August onwards, a German Training and Protection Battalion (org. Ausbildungs und Schutzbattalion) was incorporated into the RC/N organisation. This battalion would act as the partner battalion to the ANA in Kunduz. The German battalion would be rebranded ‘Task Force Kunduz’ as the long, politically driven German label to the battalion was considered too difficult to explain to other ISAF states.¹³⁴ Task Force Kunduz (TF KDZ or TFK), implemented by the Commander RC-N General Major Fritz of the German Army, allowed for the first time for large-scale operations, as more combat power could be fielded by ISAF forces. Operation HALMAZAG, executed in October–November 2010, was conducted to clear the town of Quadliam and its surroundings of Taliban influence. Subsequently, using the well-known COIN adage Shape-Clear-Holad-Build, the town would be held by the ANSF, and the governance presence would take form, in this case, by improving local infrastructure.¹³⁵ This operation was formally led by the ANA, although the German, Belgian and American participants were heavily involved in the preparation and execution of the operation. Operation HALMAZAG was considered symbolic as the Germans and Afghans were once again in cooperation during a large-scale operation, and the operation was the first time the German Army was involved in an offensive operation since World War II. Still, the Belgian OMLT was heavily involved in the operation as the Germans, and the ANA did not communicate directly with each other due to linguistic issues and German unwillingness to share confidential information, as the ANA were considered untrustworthy.¹³⁶ Nonetheless, the relations between the different parties gradually improved, and the CO of the TF KDZ especially was able to build rapport between himself and the ANA commander, to which Van Vlerken acted as a catalyst, as well as with the CO OMLT himself.¹³⁷ As it happened, operation HALMAZAG succeeded in driving any Taliban forces from the vicinity of Quatlham, although the clearing operation took more than a week to complete. Also, the Germans were able to

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132 Interview Belgian OMLT commanding officer 16, 27/01/2021.

133 B. Van Vlerken, Verslag M+1 OMLT 10_o6 (27 JUN 2010 – DEC 2010) Kunduz 2010.

134 C. von Blumröder, “Partnering: Auflage, Auftrag und Chance: Erfahrungen des 1. Kontingents Ausbildungs- und Schutzbataillon (ASB) KUNDUZ von Juli 2010 – Januar 2011,” *Das Schwarze Barett* (2011), 16.

135 M. Seliger, “Der Sieg bei Isa Khel,” *Frankfurter Allgemeine* (2010), 1.

136 Ibid., 20; Interview Belgian OMLT mentor 15, 03/12/2020.

137 Blumröder, “Partnering: Auflage, Auftrag und Chance: Erfahrungen des 1. Kontingents Ausbildungs- und Schutzbataillon (ASB) KUNDUZ von Juli 2010 – Januar 2011,” 20; Interview German commanding officer 36, 14/01/2021.

recover a Dingo vehicle that had been lost during the 2 April incident that left three German soldiers killed in action.¹³⁸ Although Halmazag had been made possible by ISAF support, the credit for the victory was given to the ANA, as the ‘Afghan face’ on operations was considered paramount in this phase of the counterinsurgency.¹³⁹

Although Operation HALMAZAG was considered a success on all levels, the Belgian OMLT still had relational issues to overcome. The relation between the kandak-level OMLT and the ANA was good. However, the communication between the brigade-level OMLT and the ANA kandak was inadequate.¹⁴⁰ In the official report to Brussels, the senior Belgian brigade OMLT officer and also RCH stated that “the senior German mentor has insufficient command of the English language, displays a despicable sense of humour and has not given any guidance whatsoever to the senior kandak mentors during his entire tenure.”¹⁴¹ The German commander was also assessed as lacking “self-confidence and lacking respect from his subordinates.”¹⁴² Moreover, the senior Belgian mentor made scathing remarks towards the Afghan brigade-level officers, as he considered the ANA to “lack any planning capabilities in any domain, disrupting the efforts of the mentoring team.”¹⁴³ One Belgian officer also lamented the continuous Afghan requests for alcoholic beverages.¹⁴⁴ On the kandak level, however, Van Vlerken considered a complimentary bottle of wine to be a means towards a good relationship between him and the kandak commander.¹⁴⁵ Alcohol was, of course, a taboo in the strictly Islamic country of Afghanistan, but some Belgian officers took the more liberal views towards alcohol by some of the ANA to smoothen the relations. However, this cut both ways as apparently some of the ANA soldiers demanded alcoholic beverages as the starting point of any interaction.

In conclusion, OMLT 4 validated its tactics and organisation and was also able to build a good rapport with both the ANA kandak as well with the TFK. However, OMLT 4 did experience friction between the kandak and brigade levels, as well as having to manoeuvre around inter-allied problems. Operation HALMAZAG was the pinnacle of the deployment, which forced a renewed cooperation between all partners in Kunduz. Moreover, the presence of the TFK offered the ANA a partnering unit between which the next OMLTs could liaise. By the

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138 Seliger, “Der Sieg bei Isa Khel.”

139 Interview Belgian OMLT commanding officer 16, 27/01/2021.

140 J. Dierickx Evaluatieverslag EOM COS ISAF-OMLTBde_10_06 en RCH/SNR RC-N p. 4/5.

141 J. Dierickx, Evaluatieverslag EOM COS ISAF OMLTBgd-10-06 en RCH/SNR RC-N, 20/12/2010, p. 2/5.

142 Verslag X+1 COS ISAF-OMLTBde-10_06 wn RCH/SNR RC North.

143 J. Dierickx, Evaluatieverslag EOM COS ISAF OMLTBgd-10-06 en RCH/SNR RC-N, 20/12/2010 p. 2/5.

144 Interview Belgian OMLT mentor 15, 03/12/2020.

145 Verslag End of Mission OMLT 10_06 (27 Jun 2010 – 15 Dec 2010).

end of December 2010, Bvr/5Li transferred its tasks to the Francophone battalion 12ème de Ligne Prince Leopold – 13ème de Ligne (12/13Li) from Spa.

5.2.5 OMLT 5: 12ème de Ligne Prince Leopold – 13ème de Ligne

By 2011, all preparatory efforts had settled into routine and thus required little adjustment or remedial action.¹⁴⁶ Moreover, the threat levels in Kunduz had decreased significantly, making TICs a rather scarce event. As such, battalion 12ème de Ligne Prince Leopold – 13ème de Ligne (12/13Li) split itself into the ‘KAIA guard’ element and the ‘OMLT’ element, again over the lines of experience and individual quality. During the pre-deployment training, most information was by now collected through the OMLT two rotations earlier, and two reconnaissance trips were made by the commanding officer and his staff to the incumbent OMLT. One interviewee stated that “as we were the 5th rotation, the lessons learned from the other detachments were already taken into account before our deployment regarding the material and the training. We did not receive additional equipment during our tour, and we also didn’t adapt any of our TTPs. I guess it’s because our preparation had been well planned and conducted.”¹⁴⁷ Also, 12/13Li did not make any adjustments to the restated mission statement of its predecessors.¹⁴⁸

Operationally, the Belgian kandak benefited from the installation of a ‘tactical operations centre’ at the brigade level, which aimed to deconflict the operations of the multinational OMLT structure on both the kandak and brigade levels.¹⁴⁹ Also, the installation of the Persistent Threat Detection System (PTDS), a tethered aerostat-based system capable of staying aloft for weeks at a time and providing round-the-clock surveillance of broad areas, improved the safety of the ISAF troops in Kunduz from April 2011 onwards.¹⁵⁰

As a result of operation HALMAZAG and NOWRUZ, the ANA now operated two combat outposts (COPs) in Kunduz. Each of these COPs was manned by around fifty Afghan Army soldiers, which were at times accompanied by Belgian OMLT members in order to advise and assist with defence plans, mortar fire plans and patrol planning.¹⁵¹ At the main base in Kunduz, the OMLT was primarily focused on the provision of training.

146 Interview Belgian OMLT commanding officer 18, 09/02/2021; “Ils Sont Parés Pour L’Afghanistan,” *Le P’tit 12 Li Regimental Gazette* (2010).

147 Email correspondence Belgian OMLT mentor 19, 26/10/2020.

148 Ibid.

149 Lt. Col. Cabo, Evaluation la mission OMLT Bde et SNR/RCH (Dec 10–Jun 11), 7; G. Swyngedaauw, ISAF OMLTBde_10_12: Uitbating verlag EoM.

150 See: <https://www.defensemедianetwork.com/stories/return-of-the-military-airship/>, accessed 16/06/2022, G. Swyngedaauw, ISAF OMLTBde_10_12: Uitbating verlag EoM.

151 Email correspondence Belgian OMLT mentor 19, 26/10/2020.

During the execution of the mission, two operations stand out. The first was operation NAWROZ, which aimed to clear and hold terrain 60 km south of Kunduz city. During this operation, which was supported by ISAF air power, two Afghan companies cleared the town of ARABHA between 20 to 28 February 2011. During this operation, an ANA soldier and fourteen insurgents were (reportedly) killed in action.¹⁵² The second operation was a road move which aimed to collect a new ANA kandak in Kabul and escort this unit back to Kunduz. This operation, dubbed SALANG EXPRESS, also had a premiere in that, for the first time in Belgian military history, reporters were allowed to accompany Belgian forces as embedded journalists. As the convoy operation was rather uneventful—no enemy contacts were observed—the subsequent articles gave a candid impression of the Belgian OMLT mission.¹⁵³ As it were, the statement made by the Belgian OMLT to the journalists reflected the official reporting at the End of Mission-report to Brussels. 12/13Li reiterated earlier statements from its predecessors with regard to the ANA's lacklustre planning capacities, unwillingness to adapt to new ideas or doctrine and general *inshallah* attitude.¹⁵⁴ The lack of progress after two and a half years, in combination with a general sense of frustration towards the Afghan attitude, led one OMLT 5 mentor to assess that “if the mentoring is not continued, I fear that much of our efforts will be lost.”¹⁵⁵

Being the 5th iteration of the OMLT, the Belgian forces recognised these trends. On a positive note, the Belgian force structure and tactics had been validated, and the importance of bilateral relations between mentor and mentee had been recognised. Belgian commanding officers were, therefore, very vocal in their End of Mission reports that a good command of English was imperative for the mission.¹⁵⁶ The more complicated relationship with the German force commander, as mentioned in the previous paragraphs, persisted (the SNR of this rotation stated that “the relations with the senior mentor are electric. He does not trust his subordinates in any way and has decided to manage everything alone”), but were

152 P. Brennet, Bilan mi-mission de l'OMLT 10/12, personal archive; M. Lefebvre, Powerpoint presentation “Mentoring the ANA, OMLT experience brief,” April 2012.

153 Esmeralda Laybe “Embarquée avec les soldats belges en Afghanistan – jour 1,” RTBF, 13 May 2011, <https://www.rtbef.be/article/embarquee-avec-les-soldats-belges-en-afghanistan-jour-1-6103213>; Esmeralda Laybe “Afghanistan, embarquée avec les soldats belges – jour 2,” RTBF, 24 May 14 2011, <https://www.rtbef.be/article/afghanistan-embarquee-avec-les-soldats-belges-jour-2-6106293>; Christophe Lamfalussy “Opération Salang Express,” *La Libre*, May 2011, <https://www.lalibre.be/international/2011/05/04/operation-salang-express-QK3TNOX72BDIPLHBKqF7ZKGM/>.

154 M. Lefebvre, Powerpoint presentation “Mentoring the ANA, OMLT experience brief,” April 2012; L. Lejeune, Rapport de Fin de Mission – OMLT BDE Branche 2; J. Cabo, Evaluation la mission OMLT Bde et SNR/RCH (Dec 10–Jun 11); M. Lefebvre, End of Mission Report – Det OMLT-10/12, 15 June 2011.

155 Email correspondence Belgian OMLT mentor 19, 26/10/2020.

156 J. Cabo, Evaluation la mission OMLT Bde et SNR/RCH (Dec 10–Jun 11); M. Lefebvre, End of Mission Report – Det OMLT-10/12, 15 June 2011.

of a transient nature, and also improving, albeit slightly.¹⁵⁷ The more fundamental problems could be found in the absorptive capacity of the ANA soldiers themselves, with the numerous anecdotal evidence and the formal reporting reiterated during the rotations.

12/13Li were to be relieved by 3 PARA, which of course, had served during the first rotation of 2009. In fact, a few of the first rotations' officers would be redeployed to Kunduz, which added to the knowledge of both the job at hand, as well as the geography and demographics of the province.

5.2.6 OMLT 6 and 7: 3 PARA (2) and Chasseurs Ardennais (2)

OMLT 6 and OMLT 7 saw both 3 PARA and the Chasseurs Ardennais battalion recalled to Kunduz. The introduction of a new German commander and senior mentor, Col. Rohde, improved the relationship between the Belgian service member and the Brigade OMLT.¹⁵⁸ Although the preparation and the execution of these rotations followed by now familiar lines, an important observation is that by now, frustration and acquiescence with regard to the Afghan Army's military performance appeared to have set in. Rohde wrote in his End of Mission assessment that there is a centralised decision-making structure within the ANA, which means that there is no initiative among officers, or as he described it, a "wait and see" attitude. Moreover, the ANA has a "use and consume" rather than "maintain and sustain" mentality. This makes it difficult for mentors to improve their methods.¹⁵⁹ On the battalion level, some people were tired of explaining the same thing every time again, and some were disappointed regarding the progress that was made with the ANA.¹⁶⁰

During the second tenure of 3 PARA, one operation stands out to illustrate the ad hoc nature of ANA-led counterinsurgency efforts and the disconnect between the ISAF and ANA forces. From 13 December to 17 December 2011, Operation WARDUJ was executed by an Afghan/German/Belgian combination. During this period, one of the Belgian officers recalled that WARDUJ was "intended to free a number of ANP service members that had been captured by local Taliban in the province of Badakhshān."¹⁶¹ The Belgian RCH and SNR, Lt. Col. Leclercq, together with Col. Rohde and the ANA Brigade commander, Brigadier General Waziri, agreed on an operation to liberate the captives. It was decided to deploy a kandak to the location where they had been captured in order to attempt a retrieval. Although Brigadier

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¹⁵⁷ Ibid.

¹⁵⁸ Interview German OMLT senior mentor 37, 18/01/2021.

¹⁵⁹ End of Tour Assessment Report, 28 December 2011, 2.

¹⁶⁰ Interview Belgian OMLT commanding officer 21, 19/01/2021; V. Descheemaeker, End of Mission report – Det OMLT 11_06, 20/12/2011; Interview Belgian OMLT commanding officer 24, 09/12/2020; Focus Group Belgian OMLT mentor 9, Belgian OMLT mentor 28 and Belgian OMLT mentor 13, 25/01/2021; Interview Belgian OMLT mentor 31, 26/02/2021.

¹⁶¹ Interview Belgian OMLT mentor 22, 16/12/2020.

Waziri intended to deploy the same day, Leclercq convinced him to delay until the next day in order for the Belgians to prepare. As the Belgian kandak-OMLT was in the process of being rotated, the deployed kandak was without its battalion-level mentors. Still, as the ANA brigade commander was supported by his own Western advisers, it was agreed that several would accompany him for the operation. An ad-hoc ANA brigade Command Post (CP) and multinational mentor team were quickly established, together with several Afghan officers, including the ANA intel officer (S2) and a local interpreter.¹⁶²

Whilst the kandak moved by road towards the designated area, the Afghan/German/Hungarian/Belgian ANA/OMLT combination was moved by US helicopters towards a mountain ridge, where the CP was set up. As relatively few service members were present to man the CP, everyone, including the Western officers, participated in guard duties. Unconcerned by elaborate preparations, Waziri had not brought his personal gear with him, so one of his soldiers had to scavenge a blanket and pillow to keep him warm during the night.¹⁶³

As the kandak reached the CP, the Belgian OMLT was surprised by the sudden delivery of a note written by the captors of the ANSF service members, consisting of a list of demands that had to be met in order to guarantee their safe return.¹⁶⁴ Unable to meet these demands, Waziri himself visited the nearest town, and while he bought a sheep at the local market to celebrate the presumed imminent return of the captive ANP, he and his staff were involved in a series of frantic telephone calls with, as it turned out, local powerbrokers and lower-tier members of opposing forces. The next day, as the ANA kandak started its clearance of the valley in order to reach the location where captives and captors had been spotted by NATO ISR assets, the OMLT were again surprised with the Afghan way of warfare: operations would start around at 10 a.m., and stopped well before dinner, as food had to be prepared during daylight. This low operational tempo led to a two-day advance, stalling at less than 300 m of the target area on the second day. As the phone calls between the ANA officers and local chiefs and powerbrokers again increased in number, the captive ANPs were suddenly released, as the opposing military forces recognised the inevitable progress of the ANA battalion, which would reach their positions before noon the next day.¹⁶⁵ Unable to fight

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162 Interview Belgian OMLT mentor 22, 16/12/2020; Interview German OMLT senior mentor 37, 18/01/2021; Interview Belgian OMLT mentor 23, 16/02/2021.

163 Interview Belgian OMLT mentor 22, 16/12/2020.

164 Personal archive O. Rohde, original note and translation of the note.

165 Interview Belgian OMLT mentor 22, 16/12/2020; Interview Belgian OMLT mentor 23, 16/02/2021, Interview German OMLT senior mentor 37, 18/01/2021; Powerpoint presentation operation Warduj, personal archive O. Rohde.

the ANA on equal terms, an honourable solution was reached by releasing the prisoners, apparently with Waziri's guarantee not to pursue the matter any further.¹⁶⁶

Although both rotations had to cope with a substantial IED threat—the Belgian OMLT suffered an IED attack on 23 April 2012—no Belgians were seriously wounded or killed during both rotations.¹⁶⁷ Indeed, a degree of routine had set in. OMLT 6 had still managed thirty-three patrols, excluding mentoring tasks on the COPs and main base in Kunduz, and the ChA benefitted from a new kandak commander, who was more willing to go on operations compared to his predecessor.¹⁶⁸ Still, most operations were OMLT-initiated, with a minority of the patrols being initiated by the Brigade.¹⁶⁹ Importantly, a level of distrust still lingered between the ANA and the OMLT. This distrust is exemplified by the Belgian suspicion of its Afghan allies as the aforementioned IED attack on the ChA occurred at a moment when no Afghan forces were present on the axis where the IED struck. The ANSF was supposed to be present at that axis, and thus a sense that the ANA knew about the attack beforehand stuck with the Belgians.¹⁷⁰ As both battalions concluded their mentorship, the OMLT was transitioned to a Military Advisory Team as the battalion Carabinier Prins Boudewijn – Grenadiers arrived.

5.2.7 MAT 8: Regiment Carabiniers Prins Boudewijn – Grenadiers

At the end of February 2012, the battalion Regiment Carabiniers Prins Boudewijn – Grenadiers (1C/1Grn) was invited to the Bde HQ for a briefing about “the way ahead in Kunduz.” During this briefing, the news was brought up that the structure of the OMLT would be transformed into that of the Military Advisor Team (MAT). This required several changes. Instead of five teams of eight persons, the detachment now had to consist of three teams with two advisers and a force protection platoon. There would also be one company mentor for two ANA company commanders. Later on, in the next MAT rotation, this would extend to one mentor for all company commanders.¹⁷¹ For 1C/1Grn, this implied that fewer personnel were needed to staff the advisory effort, as fewer company teams were needed. This was disappointing for the Belgian service members; although very little combat had taken place over the past twelve months, the aura of a combat mission was still present, and as this was the first OMLT deployment for 1C/1Grd, the battalion was eager. Fortunately for 1C/1Grn, as the battalion was already close to deployment, the Defence Staff allowed the full detachment to deploy,

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¹⁶⁶ Interview Belgian OMLT mentor 22, 16/12/2020.

¹⁶⁷ Interview Belgian OMLT commanding officer 24, 09/12/2020.

¹⁶⁸ Powerpoint presentation OMLT 6, personal archive V. Descheemaker.

¹⁶⁹ Interview Belgian OMLT commanding officer 24, 09/12/2020.

¹⁷⁰ Ibid.

¹⁷¹ Interview Belgian OMLT mentor 30, 13/01/2021; Van Herreweghe “Het leven in Kunduz,” part 1.

regardless of its reduced tasks.¹⁷² Still, the detachment had to be mentally prepared that this mission now would be one of advising instead of mentoring, which has been done in the past few years.¹⁷³ Thus a change of mindset was needed: the new approach was limited to being an adviser rather than a mentor and a “second commander.”¹⁷⁴

Ultimately, the new concept was created to shift slowly from coaching at the lower levels (e.g., company) to the higher levels (battalion and brigade).¹⁷⁵ The decision by US President Barack Obama to end combat operations by US service members in Afghanistan by 2014, made during a speech on June 2011, made the inevitable transition to a self-supporting Afghan National Army imminent, whether or not the ANA would be capable of doing so.¹⁷⁶ Consequently, ISAF would “gradually permit tactical formations to function on their own, eventually concentrating on advisory work at brigade and corps level.”¹⁷⁷ ISAF’s commanding officer during 1C/1Grn tenure, US General John Allen, indeed expected the ANA to have problems holding their own in the insurgency but reasoned that “the Afghan army and police needed to be tested progressively and faults rectified while ISAF was still in a position to support them.”¹⁷⁸ As 1C/1Grn was already close to deployment, little could be adjusted in the pre-deployment training. As it were, the only significant change was the incorporation of role players to act as ANA. To this end, another Belgian battalion was employed in this role, which only partly provided for 1C/1Grn’s training needs: “1/3L was given the questionable honour to perform as role-players, a sheer impossible assignment. But truth be told, they played their roles with zest, including a lack of punctuality, their inability to read a map and lacking logistical preparations, which would all be situations that we would experience in Kunduz with the ANA.”¹⁷⁹ In the End of Mission report of MAT 8, it is stated that the transition from OMLT (with five company teams) via a MAT with three company teams to a MAT with one coy team fitted perfectly within the NAVO exit strategy.¹⁸⁰ During this period, a trend of moving away from the lowest tactical levels could indeed be observed. For the Belgian contingent, this meant that the result-driven operation, i.e., improving the ANA until a satisfactory

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172 1C/1Grd Regimental Gazette, *Historiek 20 Jaar Caribiniers-Grenadiers*, 2013, 149.

173 Internal newspaper, 147.

174 Verslag einde PDT Det MAT 12_06, p. 8 Bijl A.

175 Johan de Laere – Mentoring in Afghanistan, 19.

176 Trevor McCrisken, “Justifying Sacrifice: Barack Obama and the Selling and Ending of the War in Afghanistan,” *International Affairs* 88, no. 5 (2012): 994, 1005; The White House, “Remarks by the President on the Way Forward in Afghanistan,” 22 June 2011, <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2011/06/22/remarks-president-way-forward-Afghanistan>.

177 Robert Johnson and Timothy Clack, *At the End of Military Intervention: Historical, Theoretical, and Applied Approaches to Transition, Handover and Withdrawal* (Constitutions of the Countries, 2015) 33–34.

178 *Ibid.*, 34.

179 1C/1Grd Regimental Gazette, *Historiek 20 Jaar Caribiniers-Grenadiers*, 2013, 156.

180 End of Mission MAT 12_06, 9.

level of competence had been reached, was replaced by a time-driven deployment.¹⁸¹ Notwithstanding the reduced mentoring capacity, 1C/1Grn participated in regular combined BEL/ANA patrols, which did not result in hostilities with the Taliban, although the IED threat was still present in the area of operations.¹⁸² Ultimately, 1C/1Grn considered its deployment a success, stating that the ANA were now capable of being “independent on the company level” and “efficient with advisers” on the kandak level.¹⁸³

With the conclusion of the deployment, the OMLT had formally ceased to exist in Kunduz, with the MAT now the formal designation for ISAF’s ANA mentoring efforts. Although, in some respects, the change from the OMLT to the MAT is an almost semantic exercise, the change marked the beginning of the gradual withdrawal of ISAF forces from Afghanistan. Ultimately, the Belgian MAT would end its mission on 1 May.¹⁸⁴ The 1/3 Lanciers battalion would act as a redeployment MAT with a reduced mission duration and scope.¹⁸⁵

5.3 Subconclusion

With the safe return of 1/3 Lanciers to Belgium, the advisory efforts in Kunduz province were concluded. First and foremost, the Belgian government were very content with its performance. The Minister of Defence, Pieter de Crem, stated that he was satisfied with the capabilities of the Afghan soldiers: “compared to Afghan norms, we can call [this mission] a success. That country has progressed from a medieval clan structure to a modern state structure in a decade’s time. Now they can further build on their security structures.”¹⁸⁶ De Crem resounded the positive comments from Belgian leadership, including the senior officers involved with the OMLT/MATs. On the political front, Belgium had participated in a combat deployment that was understood to be a dangerous endeavour without suffering any combat losses. As the US and Germany started their redeployment of combat forces, including from Kunduz, Belgium could honourably withdraw its OMLT/MAT without being accused of ally defection, as was the case

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181 Interview Belgian OMLT mentor 31, 26/02/2021.

182 1C/1Grd Regimental Gazette, Historiek 20 Jaar Caribiniërs-Grenadiërs, 2013, 158.

183 Ibid., 160.

184 1C/1Grd Regimental Gazette, Historiek 20 Jaar Caribiniërs-Grenadiërs Bijlage B. Overzicht van de operaties van 1992 tot 2012 waarin Caribiniërs-Grenadiërs ingezet werden.

185 Interview Belgian OMLT commanding officer 32, 16/12/2020; EoM MATBDE 13_01, annex B.

186 Gie Goris, “De Septemberverklaring van de Taliban,” MO, 28 September 2015, <https://www.mo.be/nieuws/de-septemberverklaring-van-de-taliban>. Original quote: “Naar Afghaanse normen kunnen we spreken van een succes. Dat land is in tien jaar tijd van een middeleeuwse clanstructuur naar een 21e-eeuwse structuur gebracht. Nu kunnen ze een nieuwe veiligheidsstructuur opbouwen.”

with the Netherlands in 2010.¹⁸⁷ Belgian officers validated De Crem's positive sentiment. Col. Johan De Laere of the ACOS training and operations—and as such involved with all Belgian operations, including the Kunduz deployment—authored an article in which he acknowledged the slow progress that the ANA made over the years, but he also pronounced his confidence that the accumulation of Belgian advise and support would ultimately enable the ANA to be an independent force cometh 2014.¹⁸⁸ De Laere expected the ANA to improve quickly and stated that the Belgian *kandak* was already “effective with advisers.”¹⁸⁹ The CO of OMLT 1, Lt. Col. Schoemaekers, saw “significant progress on the company level, and slower progress on the *kandak* level. The latter improved as the Belgians joined the *kandak* on operations.”¹⁹⁰ Lt. Col. Bart Laurent, the SNR of OMLT 2 and later the CO of the *kandak* OMLT conveyed his absolute confidence in the mission by stating that there was “no doubt about it” when reporting on the added value of the Belgian contingent.¹⁹¹ Lt. Col. Van Vlerken also mentioned the increased effectiveness that resulted from the OMLT's efforts.¹⁹² Moreover, he assessed the *kandak*—already in the fourth rotation—“is capable of executing operations independently, and that the OMLT's deployment results in a qualitative improvement.”¹⁹³ Senior German Mentor Rohde commented that “HQ 2Bde made without any doubt progress, mainly within the fields of leadership, planning and coordination.”¹⁹⁴ The End of Mission report of the 12_01 rotation mentioned the ANA's capability to plan brigade- and *kandak*-level operations independently, as well as the improved functioning of the 1 (personnel) and 4 (logistics) branches.¹⁹⁵

Although multiple sources comment on the *gradual* progress that has been made by the ANA during the Belgian involvement, and regularly the Afghan warrior culture and cavalier attitude towards planning and logistics are also lauded, the positive comments are outweighed by the sheer volume of reflections on the Afghan inability or unwillingness to absorb advice and guidance. In this chapter, a number of rather negative assessments that were formally reported to ACOS Ops & Trg have been described. The reasons behind the contradictory reporting remain somewhat of an enigma, as no action was taken to uncover the motives behind the contrast. Still, the numerous reports and commanding officers declaring that the ANA would eventually have to perform without assistance, in combination with the, at times, blistering assessment

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187 See: Massie, “Why Democratic Allies Defect Prematurely: Canadian and Dutch Unilateral Pullouts from the War in Afghanistan.”

188 J. De Laere, “Mentoring in Noord-Afghanistan,” *Belgisch Militair Tijdschrift* (2012), 19–20.

189 Ibid., 16–17.

190 Interview Belgian OMLT commanding officer 1, 04/11/2020.

191 B. Laurent, Ops evaluatie van de opdracht bij einde zending SNR/RCH Kunduz (28 Jul – 28 Dec 09), undated.

192 Vlerken, “OMLT – Mentor in Afghanistan,” 112.

193 B. van Vlerken, Verslag End of Mission OMLT 10_06 (27 Jun 10 – 15 Dec 10).

194 L. Leclercq, End of Mission Report BELU ISAF 11-06, 10.

195 P. Vermeer, End of Mission Report (EoM) MAT Bde 12/01, 07/07/2012, 14–15.

of their capacities, imply that senior Belgian leadership was stuck between the knowledge that the Afghan solution would have to be found in the *couleur locale*, albeit without the conviction that the ANA would be able to deliver, leading to a degree of self-deception their assessments.

Col. Jan Moortgat, the last Brigade MAT SNR/RCH, wrote in an article in the Belgian military journal about the positive knock-on effects for the Land Component through the lens of the OMLT/MAT deployment, concluding that the Land Component had made strides in working in an international environment, a boost in the acquisition of modern materiel, and a shift in pre-deployment training activities within the counterinsurgency context.¹⁹⁶ Moortgat thus focused on the positive outcomes for the Land Component itself rather than concentrating on the ANA's improvement. Remarkably, the assessment that the OMLT/MAT deployment had been constructive for the Land Component itself was shared by most senior Belgian officers involved in the OMLT. An important topic in Moortgat's assessment is the necessity of having a good command of the English language, which was a reiteration of the statements made by every senior Belgian officer involved in the OMLT, notwithstanding the staff being Flemish or Walloon.

Another constant in the Belgian reporting is the positive assessment of the pre-deployment training as well as the quality of the Belgian contingent in general. Repeatedly, the Belgians were considered an exemplary OMLT in terms of the quality of the staff. The American assessment of the first OMLT is a case in point. Both considerations might be explained by the careful emulation of coalition partners' best practices on mentoring foreign forces, as well as their own national experiences with regard to mentoring. Matching the rank of the mentee by the mentor has been a typical Belgian custom, bypassing the 'one-up' method used by other nations' OMLTs. With the Land Component not otherwise engaged in large-scale commitments, each assigned battalion has been able to select the most mature and experienced service member for its OMLT, leaving the junior staff to guard KAIA. As professional infantrymen can be considered overqualified for guarding an airport, no problems arose from the deployment of junior soldiers. The ability to select the top tier cadre for the OMLT, however, is a practice that was not matched by either the British or the Dutch.

With no combat losses, positive knock-on effects for the Land Component and an opportune moment to disengage from Kunduz, the Belgian OMLT exertions were considered favourably. The direct object of the efforts, the ANA, was not by any means able to function according to the 'capability milestone one' benchmark. As mentoring the ANA became a time-driven instead of a result-driven effort, this gradually became less imperative, especially on the lower tactical levels. Considering the risk-averse Belgian political attitude in combination with a relative mission statement—mission verbs such as 'improving,' 'supporting,' and 'enabling' always left room to claim success without any indication of formal or institutional learning-leaving—the ANA as an effective combat unit was never the aspiration.

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196 J. Moortgat, "Begeleiding en advies in Noord-Afghanistan: Een positieve evolutie voor de Landcomponent," *Belgisch Militair Tijdschrift* (2014).