

AFGHANISTAN - THREE SHORT STORIES

1- INTERVIEW WITH HQ WINGCOMMANDER MCCORD - STAFF OF RC SOUTH

Head Quarters Commander McCord of Region Command South explained us about RC-South which is a Nato ISAF Headquarter at Kandahar. He told us about the following matters. RC South is responsible for Region Command South, which covers six different provinces in Afghanistan. Nimruz, Helmand, Kandahar Zabul Uruzghan and Daikondi. Nimruz and Daikondi are provinces that ISAF has no permanent troops stationed. The other four provinces are given over to particular task forces. Generally speaking each task-force follows a country, but not necessarily. Lets look at TF (Task Force) Helmand first. This is a British lead TF, but has significant representations from for instance the Danes. TF Kandahar is primarily a Canadian lead operation. The smaller area Zabul is focussed around Romanian troops, but supported by the Americans. Uruzghan is a Dutch lead TF, with an Australian lead reconstruction team and that is the structure which RC-South has to look after. We take our orders of the HQ (Head Quarters) in Kabul, responsible for the whole country, and we push this in our own plan for the southern part of Afghanistan. Next to that we have RC West with Spanish and Italian troops in it and looking east of us we have RC-East with actually only American support. South we have the very long Pakistan border, and west we have the border with Iran. You can imagine that we have at RC-South a very large organisation and a very large area to cover, about the same size as Scotland and England together. Command of RC-South is directed by a Canadian 'two-star' at the moment, Major-General Lessard, responsible for the operational sides, support functions, but also two very important tasks within our mission here. Reconstruction and development of Afghanistan, working with the Government of Afghanistan implicating houses, wells for water, energy, all kinds of reconstruction. The other part is the security section such as the development of the Afghan National Army (ANA) and Afghan National Police (ANP), So you see we take care of the security concept, the operational side as we term it, the security side, and the reconstruction and development side.

Next to that we have of course to look after ourselves, as it comes to security, daily routines, running our offices and logistics such as food and fuel, you name it. That makes a small organisation within the organisation. The extra advantage is that Kandahar of course is a very large airbase, and HQ of RC-South happens to be accidentally on this airbase. It gives us advantages in using communications and air-bridges to get all kind of people within the theatre or in and out of the region by means of the various helicopters. RC-South brings together the Task Forces and that we are all moving together in the right direction. Tweaking, planning, helping to execute in certain cases within the 'Grand Concept' that allows us to assist the Government of Afghanistan to bring proper stability and security and new opportunities for the people of Afghanistan, for RC South in this particular part of the country. Looking at the training- and operational side of the ANA they reached the point now where we assist and they definitely increase in quality. We assist, mental, guide them through operations. Our operations are very much 'them and us' , in that order working together. Depending on what we are doing it sometimes is more of them than us and the other way. Every action we do is planned with an executed unit of ANA and ANP. We recognise that their contribution to bring safety and security to this area is actually part of the solution to bring reconstruction. We have liaison teams that first train, and later on operate with formations of the ANA and ANP. They did so well in the liberation of Musa Qala, the main part of the operation was totally ANA ! They did it, very very well on their own ! The pride they quite rightly have and deserve, is there and the whole nation realises that fact. ISAF supported that operation, but they did it ! This success is well known by the region and all

over the country as well. The society is beginning to have an increased interest in its own organisations, and the functioning of them properly. For ANP, they started at a lower level, but they now realise that there is work to be done, and the next stage is to develop that. They are trained now for eight weeks, they get a higher standard as they have now and they get all kinds of skills that accreditate them to get in action such as police-work, minor tactics, and in general serving the community. So we can help the Afghans, who are a very pragmatic people, to develop the roads, security and economy, and provide them with the conditions to develop it themselves in a later stage. Looking now at the export market of 2007 for just fruit, the first half year is about 20 million dollars and that is already 50% more than the year before. Now next to local markets they start export to Pakistan, to the Middle-East, Iran, and in small degree to the West Coast USA, Canada and Europe. That is a good indicator where Afghanistan can go. It's a sigh that with good leadership and good management Afghanistan will move forward, and we see that almost on daily bases. There are also other projects such as the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs who help with planting trees, 100.000 in 2007 and another 100.000 coming up this year, also growing saffron spices, that are the positive developments we can contribute to with security. Afghans are by very nature merchandisers for years , but there are also a lot of NGO's, Non Governmental Organisations who help to develop. Looking again at saffron, a very expensive spice, they get help how to put it in the ground, grow it and harvest it. It's not to do it for them, but to show them how they can do it themselves. That way they can build their own destiny.

2- THE LAST FLIGHT – A RAMP CEREMONY:

It is understandable that – having lost a son or daughter in Afghanistan – as family you won't like it to see the pictures of the deceased in all sorts of media. Therefore we as aviation journalists understand and respect(ed) the fact that we were not allowed to make pictures of such a ceremony. Describing it however for our readers is no problem. Canada lost another soldier, by that time their number 78 soldiers and one civilian. We were allowed to stand on the roof of 'Taliban The Last Stand' (TLS, now HQ COMCAF) and view the ceremony.

A Canadian Hercules stands on the platform, a thin yellow painted line comes out from under the plane on the concrete of the ramp, as it were a long ribbon. A strong light burns in the Hercules, the hatch is opened. From out of the darkness soldiers come marching two by two in long rows, only their steps resound in the chilly wet dark night. The troops march in, their commander turns them over to one coordinating platform commander, who sets them 'at ease'. More and more troops come marching in out of 'nowhere', large groups big countries, small units small countries. Finally the thin yellow line has on both sides about six meters space. Escorted by on both sides as well two rows of soldiers. Thousands of soldiers ! No sounds left besides the wind and rain. A bagpipe starts to play, and an LAV arrives. The commanding officer gives a 'Salute' command and all thousands of soldiers and officers salute, silent. The peloton mates of the deceased take the coffin, worthy covered with a Canadian flag from out of the LAV, and carry him between the rows, slowly, towards the Hercules. Nothing lasts but the footsteps of the men carrying their buddy. The bagpipe plays, the commander speaks, in French. Somehow we feel, know, that the words spoken are a consolation for all present at the moment, though we cannot understand it. The flag-covered coffin is carried slow and worthy into the Hercules. A preacher speaks. That's all, what should there be more ? This victim – as many others – gave his life for the Afghan people, to help them, to avoid attacks on food-convoys, to guard the roads, to avoid the killing of innocent civilians, to help them build a better base for a better future. Which is absolutely necessary as long as chafing situations exist that mothers offer their children for sale for food, as local media reported.

BLUE ON BLUE:

This term means nightmare. For those who don't know the term, know that while having military exercises the 'good guys' are 'blue' and the opposing forces are the 'red' guys. So this may explain this phrase. Blue on blue means that soldiers of the own force have been giving fire on their own troops. It may seem impossible, but it's a reality that may happen, and so it did. In the night of Saturday 12th of January a Dutch patrol was busy, helping the Afghan refugees to get back and return to their houses. Taliban or – with a clean word – Opposing Militant Forces (OMF) had dissipated the locals. By means of international forces the OMF were wiped out at their own turn, and a Dutch unit was checking out the empty houses, if there were any OMF still somewhere, and also to check the houses on any arms, mines, booby traps, you name it. In very, very bad weather circumstances they did their job. What many may not expect, and even the Afghans themselves neither, is that it can snow on places where you might never expect it. But it does. Take the story that in the second week of January some 11.000 (!) sheep were frozen to death, as well as over 70 people, (over 500 in a short period) Afghan nomads that had no roof or house in the field while being taken by the extreme snowfall and extreme temperatures below zero. Icy conditions, wet snow, hard rainfall, hard wind, name it. Under these circumstances the team was doing its job. Suddenly there is gunfire, a fight at a qualaa, (Afghan house/farm) within very unclear circumstances. A qualaa can be even in bright weather already very complex for groundtroops. After a lot of noise and a long duration fight two guys apparently Taliban, were given fire. But they appeared to be own forces, two guys in the age of 20 and 22 years, who were far away from home, fighting for the rights of the honest and good willing Afghan people, building up this nation, making conditions for Afghan people to live and work in their houses, to work and get an at least acceptable life. But with the risk to lose their own lives, to give the most and valuable thing you can give, life ! And that happened that very Saturday night, under the terrible circumstances of a long lasting fight, two lives taken, by own fire in Uruzghan, south of Afghanistan. A terrible loss which cannot be expressed with words, nor for the family, neither for anyone else. Also two ANA's were killed in this action while not wearing any uniform (yet) and while seen as Taliban. While taking care of a wounded buddy who appeared to have lost both legs, Afghan National Army soldiers were shot in an equal misunderstanding under the same terrible pitch-black weather conditions, under the same extreme chaotic and confusing fight-conditions quite near to Deh Rawod.

Journalism is an art, but art can be awful. When you write in the paper that 'there was no air support' you open up a discussion. People react furious from their comfortable houses in Europe, as the many desk-managers do from their pluche seats, reading the paper and enjoying a fine cappuccino. 'And why don't they bring these guys home' may seem so easy and simple... But when you are there, right there at the spot, knowing the facts, knowing that the bodies of both shot guys simply could not be moved because of the same awful weather conditions, knowing that a Chinook helicopter was flying out three times a day (!) to try and reach Deh Rawod, which appeared not to be possible, than you know. Even the attempt flying the Chinook in such bad weather over the tops of the mountain-peak in the Sierra between Kandahar and Deh Rawod was almost suicide. 'There was not always air support'..... possible ! Let us honour all the men and woman who fly the jets and helicopters instead of flying desks. Finally one week after the incident the weather slightly improved, and the men could be brought back to Kandahar. From there an English Hercules started their last flight home.

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