

FIGHTING FOR INFORMATION

DISMOUNTED RECONNAISSANCE TROOPS AND RECONNAISSANCE IN FORCE

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“In the world of intelligence, information was power...”

— **GEN (Retired) Stanley A. McChrystal**

My Share of the Task, A Memoir

In the predawn darkness of 19 August 1942, British Commandos, Canadian Infantry, and American Rangers stormed ashore at the French port of Dieppe in a reconnaissance in force. Their objective was to destroy the port, study German coastal defenses, and determine the best way to overcome them. The result was a bloody defeat, but the information obtained prepared the way for the successful landings at North Africa, Sicily, and Normandy. Sixty-seven years later, British, Canadian, American, and Afghan forces pushed forward in Helmand Province, Afghanistan, in a reconnaissance in force which set the way for the success of Operation Moshtarak. It was not a doctrinal fast-moving, armor-heavy advance. Rather, it was a deliberate foot advance — and a model for a successful reconnaissance in force during future conflicts. Reconnaissance in force can be used by dismounted troops in modern warfare to gain information about the enemy such as his strength, locations, dispositions, and tactics. A good example is a vignette from the British 11 Brigade Reconnaissance Force (11 BRF) in Helmand Province during Operation Moshtarak.

British reconnaissance doctrine is fundamentally about stealth and finding as much information about the enemy without him being aware that you are there. Reconnaissance in force is the polar opposite; the basic premise is drawing the enemy into a fight in such a way that he reveals the information about himself without him realizing that you are doing so and is a much quicker way of gaining information. In both the British and U.S. armies, this has long been the preserve of armored units, which are mobile, protected, and have significant firepower.¹ While not incorporated into doctrine, British infantry reconnaissance platoons have adopted reconnaissance in force as a tactic and it is taught at the British Reconnaissance School. The BRFs, which are based on a cavalry squadron, are a combined arms grouping augmented with an infantry reconnaissance platoon, an antitank-guided weapon (ATGW) squad, a mortar squad, mortar fire controllers (MFCs), a fire support team (FST), and a squad of combat engineers, for a total strength of 125.² BRF doctrine is extrapolated from infantry reconnaissance doctrine, and BRFs have proven to be leaders in adapting that doctrine to the new challenges of warfare.

During its tour in Afghanistan, 11 BRF established reconnaissance in force as a tactic against the insurgents and it was a proven success. With the rise in prominence of irregular forces — ranging from the Afghan insurgents, the Da'ash (ISIS/



Map of Central Helmand Province, Afghanistan

ISIL), or irregular forces in Eastern Europe — this tactic is extremely relevant, but its effectiveness against an enemy that is equally well trained and equipped remains to be proven. Reconnaissance in force is scalable, from a platoon through a company to a battalion, and will usually be conducted by a force smaller than the one being reconnoitered. It carries a high level of risk, which can be mitigated through training with other arms, particularly with the Air Force and electronic warfare. The basic premise of reconnaissance in force is deception, which can range from forcing the enemy to unmask command and control nodes and crew-served weapons by pretending you are weaker than you are or conversely attacking him with overwhelming force for limited periods of time so that he is forced to reveal his headquarters and reserve locations. In both examples, the key risk is that the enemy takes the initiative and is able to overwhelm the reconnaissance force. The outcome is usually tactically indecisive but through use of drones, electronic warfare assets, and mortars, it allows the reconnaissance force to gather significant amounts of information.

Operation Moshtarak was an Afghan-led operation to capture the Marjah District of Helmand Province from insurgents and involved a total force of 15,000, which included five brigades of Afghan forces from the Afghan National Army, Afghan National Police, Afghan Border Police, and Afghan Gendarmerie as well as forces from the U.S., U.K., Denmark, Estonia, and Canada.³ Marjah and the surrounding district had only seen brief visits from coalition forces since the U.S.-led invasion in 2001 and was used as a base for the insurgents to rest, train, and store weapons. The district center is only 20 kilometers from the provincial capital of Lashkar Gah, and it was long suspected that insurgents commuted from Marjah throughout the rest of Helmand where they would fight.

Reconnaissance operations in and around Marjah began in September 2009 with D-Day planned for February 2010. The 11 BRF was involved throughout the operation, and the vignette that follows comes from one of the reconnaissance operations it conducted named Operation Kapcha Zarda.⁴

Operation Kapcha Zarda took place between 22-24 December 2010 in the area of Semitay Bazaar, commonly known as Five Ways Junction. Five Ways Junction had been the site of a British patrol base, which had been occupied by a platoon until the summer of 2010. The purpose of the base was to take advantage of the proximity to Marjah, deterring the insurgents from moving up through the rest of Helmand to fight. However, its relatively small size made it an opportune target for the insurgents to attack, and since it was isolated from the rest of the British forces, reinforcement, resupply, and casualty evacuation were difficult and led to the withdrawal of the platoon. This gave the insurgents free rein to move up from Marjah and attack with impunity, which they did.

The BRF's mission during Kapcha Zarda was simple: move by helicopter to Semitay Bazaar and allow the enemy to attack it, revealing insurgent locations in Marjah. The mission was supported by Predator unmanned aerial vehicle (UAV), a smaller Desert Hawk UAV, a moving target radar, and an electronic warfare team. Less the moving target radar, these resources supported the BRF 24 hours a day for the whole operation. How the action was planned was equally as simple: land under the cover of darkness, occupy a compound before the enemy can work out how many troops have landed, conduct a small patrol to act as bait for the insurgent to attack, and then allow him to think he has the upper hand while tracking fighters' movements.

The first troops landed at 0400 on 22 December on the southeast side of the canal and immediately occupied a compound which would be their base for the next two days. The noise of helicopters had broadcast the BRF's presence to everyone in the local area, but there was still uncertainty about how many troops had landed and where they were. Almost immediately, the electronic warfare team began to pick up insurgent commander's communications directing their fighters to find where the soldiers had landed. To give the insurgents something to find, a small 16-man patrol left the compound and began checking vehicles in the vicinity of the bridge. Following the insurgents' build-up, they attacked the patrol at the bridge. As with the majority of insurgent attacks, they were conducting their own reconnaissance in force, waiting for the BRF to reveal all its locations. This tit-for-tat pattern continued for two days where the BRF steadily unmasked its strength, moving nearly all its troops along the east bank of the canal and forcing the insurgents to commit more and more fighters from Marjah. This pattern was repeated for the remainder of the mission and included a probe to the western side of the bank and attacks by Apache helicopters and the Predator.

The key difference in the approach by the insurgents and the BRF is perspective. The insurgents wanted to find the positions of the BRF and attack them there and then, whereas the BRF wanted to locate the commanders and where the fighters moved from to attack them later on. Putting the BRF in this position was high risk, which was mitigated by using the canal as a physical barrier and having the ability to track the insurgents using UAVs and radars. Despite coming under attack for two days, there were no British casualties. After two days of fighting and having located numerous insurgent commanders and enemy rest locations — and having killed or wounded the majority of the fighters attacking them — the BRF returned to Camp Bastion.

Operation Kapcha Zardar provided a treasure trove of information about the insurgents in Marjah that was indispensable to the U.S. Marine Corps during its operation to liberate Marjah.

As stated by GEN McChrystal in the introduction, information is power and reconnaissance in force is an effective tactic in getting this information. As such, the tactic deserves to be developed and should be another method available to a commander. It has a proven utility against insurgent or lightly armed forces, but its utility by dismounted reconnaissance platoons in a conflict against a conventional enemy requires further investigation.

Notes

¹ ATP 3-20.98, 2-6.

² In the British Army, a squadron is a sub-unit.

³ ISAF Press Release dated 1 February 2013, <http://www.rs.nato.int/images/stories/File/2010-02-CA-059-Backgrounder-Operation%20Moshtarak.pdf>.

⁴ Dari for “dark night.”

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