



**Combat Studies Institute
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Victory on Highway 1:

Breaking the Taliban's Stranglehold in Kandahar

In July 2010, GEN David Petraeus, the commander of the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) in Afghanistan, designated the 2d Brigade Combat Team (2 BCT), 101st Airborne Division (Air Assault) as ISAF's main effort. Commanded by COL Arthur Kandarian, the brigade was responsible for conducting offensive operations in Kandahar Province's Zhari District, the birthplace of the Taliban. Since 2006, when a Canadian-led task force defeated a large concentration of Taliban fighters preparing to assault nearby Kandahar city, the Taliban had reasserted control over Zhari. They assassinated key tribal elders, established a shadow government, erected the Taliban's de facto "Supreme Court," and persecuted political prisoners in torture compounds. Economically, the Taliban had a stranglehold over commerce. On Highway 1, the major thoroughfare connecting Helmand Province to the west with the city of Kandahar to the east, the Taliban set up illegal checkpoints throughout Zhari, stopping traffic and demanding exorbitant tolls. Drivers who refused to pay were swiftly ambushed by insurgents staging out of the jungle-like terrain south of the highway. With a growing insurgency on its western doorsteps, the second largest city in Afghanistan teetered on the brink of anarchy, political instability, and economic uncertainty.

In order to break the insurgency's iron grip on Highway 1, COL Kandarian planned a series of synchronized offensive operations south of the highway. Christened as Operation DRAGON STRIKE, the plan involved the 2 BCT's two organic maneuver battalions (1st Battalion, 502d Infantry Regiment [1-502 IN] and 2d Battalion, 502d Infantry Regiment [2-502 IN]) and its Reconnaissance, Surveillance and Target Acquisition (RSTA) squadron (1st

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Squadron, 75th Cavalry Regiment [1-75 CAV]) clearing the insurgent-dominated terrain south of Highway 1. During the three-month combined arms operation, Kandarian expected his subordinate commanders to take bold action, exercise disciplined initiative, and accept prudent risks. Laying out these principles, his commander's intent was to "defeat the insurgency in Zhari ... in order to secure the people, ensure Afghan FOM [freedom of movement] on Highway 1 and improve governance and development." Based on a rigorous pre-deployment training regimen, Kandarian developed agile leaders that he trusted to independently fulfill his intent. LTC Peter Benchhoff, the 2-502 IN commander, described Kandarian's command style as "draw[ing] a circle [on a map], tell[ing] us task and purpose, and then let[ting] us go out there and achieve that intent ... it was very empowering." Kandarian's subordinate commanders were free to design schemes of maneuver tailored to their tactical environments and unforeseen contingencies.

LTC Benchhoff's 2-502 IN served as the main effort of Operation DRAGON STRIKE. Encompassing the western third of Zhari District, the battalion's area of operations (AO) included the Taliban's birthplace and was described as "the most volatile and kinetic area in southern Afghanistan." The AO's naturally defensible terrain favored insurgents. Eight-foot tall earthen grape rows, marijuana and wheat fields, tree-lined irrigation canals, and abandoned two-story mud huts facilitated insurgent cover and concealment south of the Highway. MAJ Curt Rowland, the 2-502 IN operations officer (S3), stated that the irrigation canals were similar to "World War I, trench style type defenses." Running parallel to Highway 1, three canals provided insurgents with east-west linear freedom of movement and positions to fire 82 millimeter recoilless rifles at Highway 1. Even worse, the Taliban had prepared extensive improvised explosive device (IED) belts on every north-south route connecting to Highway 1.

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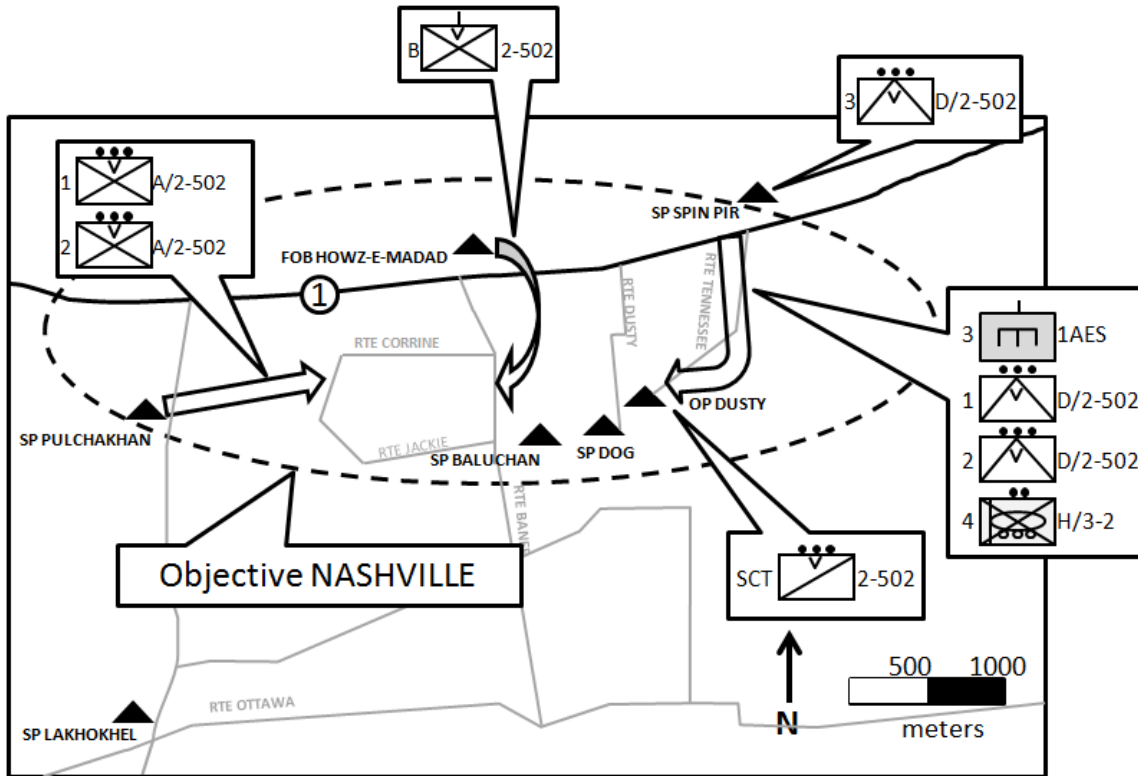
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In mid-September 2010, LTC Benchoff planned Operation NASHVILLE, 2-502 IN's first offensive effort of DRAGON STRIKE. The plan's objective was to clear "Objective Nashville," a kilometer-long corridor south of Highway 1 in the vicinity of Forward Operating Base (FOB) Howz-e-Madad. By establishing a foothold south of the Highway, the battalion would reduce violence on Highway 1 and secure the violence-plagued villages of Baluchan and Pulchakhan, meeting two objectives in COL Kandarian's intent. On 22 September, Benchoff finalized his mission statement. It stated: 2-502 IN "clears the vicinity of Objective NASHVILLE beginning on 25 Sep 10 in order to hold, creating freedom of movement along Highway 1 ... and safeguarding the people immediately south of Highway."

NASHVILLE's scheme of maneuver included air assaults and road cutting operations, which were designed to bypass the impassible north-south routes. LTC Benchoff selected CPT David Yu's Bravo Company as his main effort. The operation involved Yu's company air assaulting into the village of Baluchan at night, seizing two objectives, searching compounds, meeting village elders, and collecting the biometric data of fighting age Afghans. Two kilometers to the west, two platoons from CPT David Forsha's Alpha Company would stage out of Strong Point (SP) Pulchakhan and moved dismounted towards Baluchan, clearing compounds, and establishing temporary SPs. To the east of Bravo Company, two platoons from CPT Timothy Price's Delta Company, along with a company of British Armored engineers, would cut a new road (Route TENNESSEE) running southwest from SP Spin Pir on Highway 1 to an abandoned compound designated as Outpost (OP) Dusty. Benchoff intended to air assault CPT William Faucher's scout platoon into OP Dusty, located a kilometer southeast of FOB Howz-e-Madad. Cutting the new road proved critical in diverting insurgents away from Baluchan, trapping them to the north, and bypassing the dangerous north-to-south routes.

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LTC Benchoff fully expected his subordinate commanders and senior noncommissioned officers (NCOs) to take bold action and exercise disciplined initiative within the limits of his



Map 1: Objective NASHVILLE

intent. In addition to having previous combat experience in Iraq and Afghanistan, Benchoff’s subordinates had trained rigorously using the battalion commander’s tactical standard operating procedure (TACSOP) as a guide. Benchoff described the TACSOP as his “commander’s intent for the close infantry fight.” By training his subordinate commanders and NCOs on the same TACSOP, Benchoff fostered mutual trust and small unit cohesiveness. The restrictive Zhari terrain put a premium on flexible and opportunistic small unit leadership and decentralized command and control. “In difficult terrain where you have isolated units,” Benchoff stated, “you’ve got to have that leadership with the drive and motivation and understanding of the intent, and the desire to seek out opportunities to make success.”

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On the night of 26 September 2010, the operation kicked off. CPT Yu's Bravo Company air assaulted just to the northwest of Baluchan. During the next two days, Bravo Company searched compounds, spoke with village elders, cleared footpaths and dust trails, and scanned the biometric data of Afghan males into the Biometric Automated Toolset-Handheld Interagency Identity Detection Equipment (BAT-HIIDE). Remarkably, insurgent resistance was negligible. CPT Forsha's two Alpha Company platoons also faced minimal insurgent resistance as they moved dismounted from SP Pulchakhan towards the east.

As Alpha and Bravo Companies cleared their objectives, CPT Faucher's scout platoon air assaulted into OP Dusty before sunrise. The scouts used C4 demolition charges to clear the compound of IEDs and set up claymore mines on its perimeter. Encircled by a four-meter high mud wall, the elevated compound offered a panoramic view of the surrounding terrain and nearby roads. Comprised of three reconnaissance teams of five or six soldiers and a sniper section divided into three teams of three Soldiers (a spotter, a sniper, and a security man), Faucher's team also included a seven-man Afghan National Army (ANA) reconnaissance platoon.

Unlike Alpha and Bravo Companies, the scouts faced an immediate insurgent onslaught. Concealed in Zhari's maze of tree-lined irrigation canals, grape rows, and abandoned mud compounds, insurgents on 26 September initiated eight coordinated attacks, using machine gun fire and rocket propelled grenades (RPGs). CPT Faucher tried to regain the initiative by radioing for multiple close combat attack (CCA) helicopter gun runs, two dozen 120 millimeter mortar strikes, and thirteen 155 mm artillery strikes. Air Force F-16s also dropped 3 Guided Bomb Unit (GBU) 38 Joint Direct Attack Munitions (JDAMs) and 5 GBU 12s, all within 300 meters of the OP. At 1600, a Black Hawk helicopter delivered a resupply of ammunition. On the next day,

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Faucher lost track of the number of coordinated attacks. Undeterred by the massive firepower raining down on them, insurgents maintained the fight's intensity.

As the scouts slugged it out at OP Dusty, CPT Price moved his team out. Leaving SP Spin Pir before sunrise on 26 September, CPT Price's command included 1LT Kyle Snook's 1st Platoon, 1LT Sayre Payne's 2d Platoon, a company-sized element of British Armored engineers, and a handful of sappers. Price's objective was to blaze a new route through the jungle-like terrain, opening up a line of communication between OP Dusty and Highway 1.

In the vanguard were the British sappers, followed in order by 2d and 1st Platoons. The British sappers used two Trojan Armored Engineer Vehicles to bulldoze Route TENNESSEE. As the Trojans smashed through the dense foliage, insurgents concealed in nearby irrigation canals and tree lines blistered CPT Price's soldiers with machine gun fire and RPGs. The IED threat and thick terrain slowed down the operational tempo, making it dangerous to close with and kill the enemy. Undeterred, Price's team called in several CCA missions by Kiowas and Apaches. "The way I saw my role was to keep [the insurgents] pinned down," explained 1LT Payne. The platoon leader worked feverishly to "pinpoint exactly those muzzle flash[es] ... [and relay them] to the aviation assets, to the helicopters. And they [were] my maneuver element, because they can sweep across the objective." By the end of 26 September, Price's team bivouacked for the night at the first irrigation canal south of Highway 1. They had sustained just a single casualty: 1LT Snook triggered a pressure plate IED that ripped off one of his feet, requiring a medical evacuation (MEDEVAC).

The intensity of the fighting along Route TENNESSEE and at OP Dusty surprised LTC Benchoff. The battalion commander anticipated that the heaviest resistance would occur at Baluchan in Bravo Company's AO. Responding to the enemy's actions, Benchoff shifted a

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section of M1128 Mobile Gun System (MGS) Stryker variants from 3d Squadron, 2d Stryker Cavalry Regiment (3-2 SCR) to CPT Price. (LTC Bryan Denny's 3-2 SCR had been assigned to 2 BCT for Operation DRAGON STRIKE.) Armed with 105-millimeter cannons, the MGSs carried eighteen rounds and had the ability to apply overwhelming precision firepower in support of dismounted infantrymen. Knowing that Price had served as a Stryker platoon leader during a combat tour in Iraq, Benchoff gave him complete freedom of action to employ the two MGSs in fulfilling his intent.

As soon as the MGS section arrived on scene, CPT Price briefed the MGS commanders of his intent. Under a continuous hail of gunfire on the second day, the advance of the British engineers and CPT Price's dismounted elements had slowed to a crawl. Machine gun fire from dozens of insurgents perched in nearby wood lines repeatedly pinned down the engineers and infantrymen. Price directed the MGSs to fire canister round volleys into the wood lines, decisively tilting the battle in favor of US Soldiers. Crammed with 1,000 steel chunks that fanned out in a shotgun-like pattern, the canister rounds flattened tree lines, hacking insurgents to pieces and prompting others to leave the battlefield.

After gaining the upper hand, CPT Price was forced to make another crucial command decision. Word arrived that the situation with CPT Faucher's scout platoon during the morning had "escalated and they basically became pinned down" at OP Dusty. Price realized that unless the dozens of Taliban fighters surrounding OP Dusty were defeated, the battalion's ability to clear the kilometer-wide foothold south of Highway 1 would be compromised or delayed.

Weighing his options, CPT Price settled on a bold solution. He decided to launch a hasty and unplanned "thunder run" down Route TENNESSEE with the MGS section flanking his M-ATV, trapping or killing the insurgents surrounding Dusty. As the vehicles rumbled towards the

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OP, CPT Faucher radioed the location of six insurgent positions that were in heavy contact with the scout platoon. The dense vegetation negated the MGS's thermal imaging technology, preventing the MGS commanders from pinpointing the location of insurgents. In response, Price ordered his crew to mark the locations of the insurgent firing positions with the M-ATV's .50 caliber machine gun. He then ordered the MGS commanders to conduct a movement to contact in a dramatic "show of force."

The two MGSs raced towards the compounds as the dismounted soldiers remained in the rear. Upon arriving outside the OP, the two MGSs unleashed a punishing barrage of High Explosive Anti-Tank (HEAT) and High Explosive Plastic (HEP) rounds. Armed with AK-47s and RPGs, the insurgents' will to fight crumbled in the face of the overwhelming firepower. On CPT Price's order, the MGS crews methodically moved from compound to compound, flattening doors and blasting holes through mud walls at point blank range. The carnage ended when the MGS crews ran out of ammunition. Inside of the walled compounds, fresh blood splatter and blood trails indicated the fate of many Taliban fighters. "Needless to say, the arrival of the MGS on scene in the vicinity of OP Dusty completely ended the engagement and resulted in the enemy withdrawing from the immediate area," Price explained. His bold decision to seek out an opportunity for success paid off. NASHVILLE culminated with "secur[ing] a foothold [south of Highway 1] that we would maintain the entire deployment."

LTC Benchoff stated that the intense fighting during Operation NASHVILLE killed at least 20 insurgents, wounded dozens more, and nearly eliminated violence on Highway 1 in the battalion's AO. NASHVILLE was just one of dozens of operations launched by 2 BCT during Operation DRAGON STRIKE. Yet its decisiveness struck a major tactical and symbolic blow to the Taliban—especially because of the area's proximity to Mullah Omar's home village. Indeed,

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by mid-October, Taliban commanders complained to *New York Times* correspondents that the 2 BCT's deliberate combined arms breach south of Highway 1 had "routed" their fighters and eliminated the insurgency's Highway 1 stranglehold. Tactical victories do not always produce strategic success, but NASHVILLE showed that a light infantry unit, led by empowered leaders willing to take bold action and independently seek out opportunities for success, could triumph against a determined adversary in difficult terrain.

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