

The Battle of Chora

A Military Operational Analysis of the 2007 Defence of the Chora District Centre in Uruzgan Province, Afghanistan



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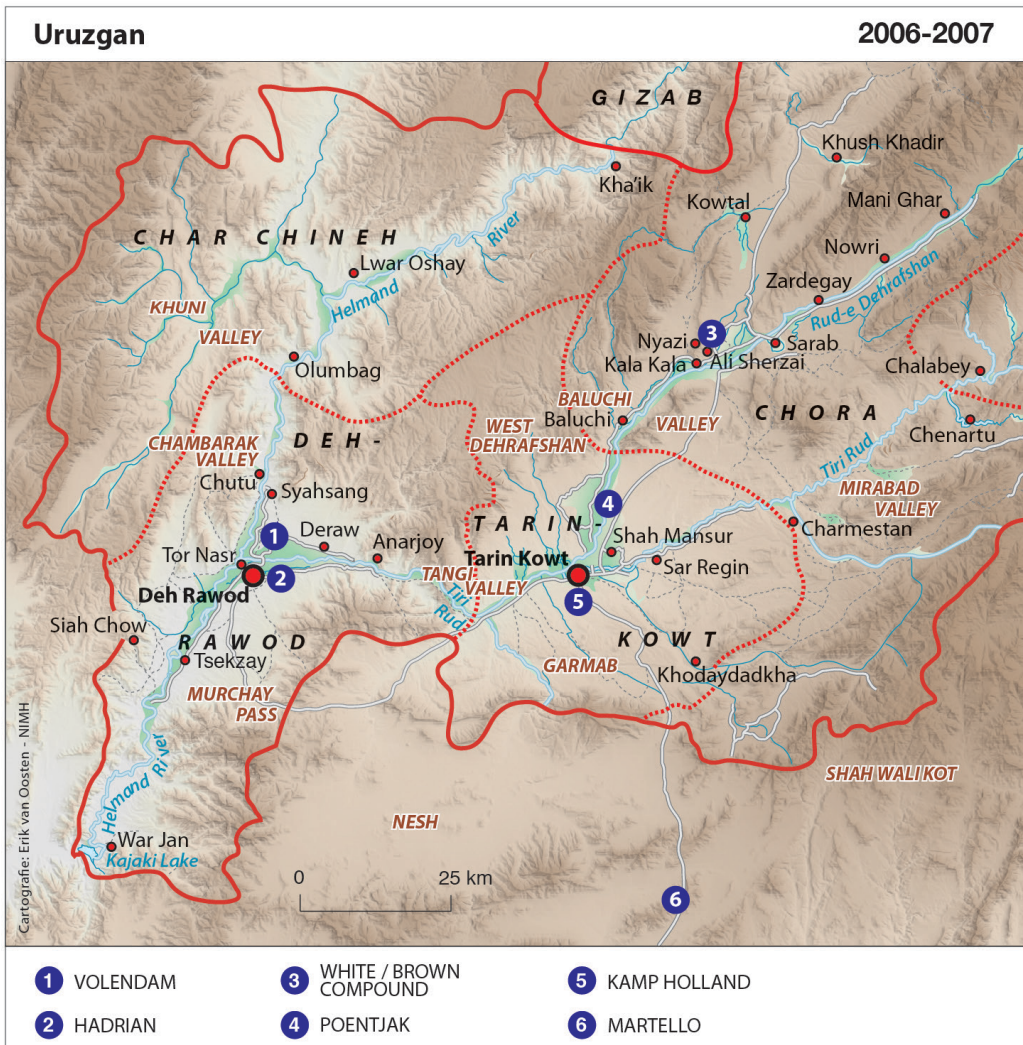
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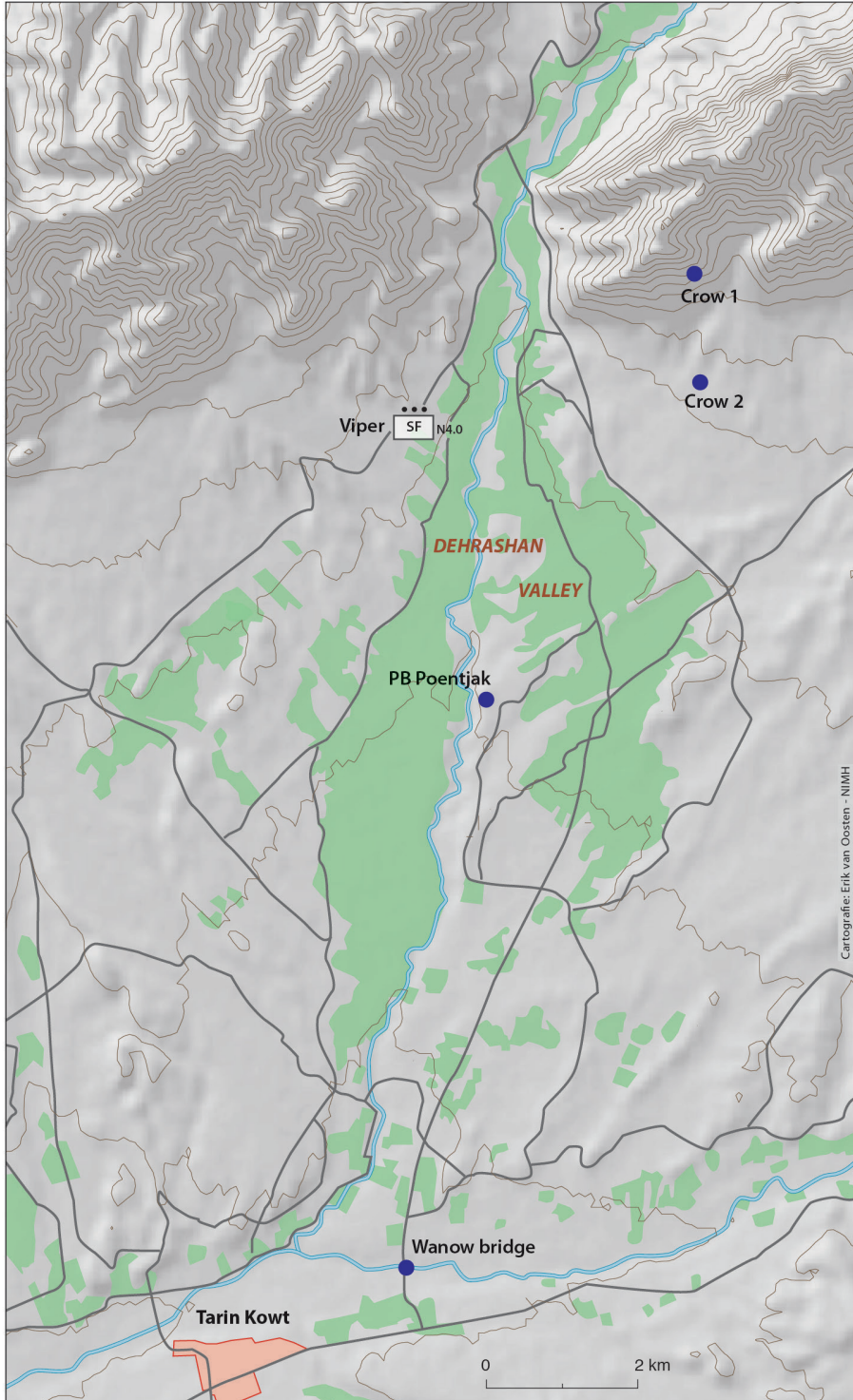
Equally important, we are highly appreciative of the soldiers who have contributed to this occasional paper by means of interviews, personal archives, tactical insights and their network. Although the list of interviewees and contributors is too expansive to thank everyone individually, we would like to express our thanks to a number of Dutch (former) service members for their time, candour, discussions and feedback on earlier drafts of this paper. These are (in alphabetical order), Lieutenant Colonel Stephan Bossmann, Lieutenant Colonel Ralf Goossens MA, Lieutenant General (Ret.) Hans van Griensven, Lieutenant Colonel Larry Hamers, Major Nick Lenssen, Brigadier General Rob Querido and Brigadier General Gino van der Voet. Each of these officers held a command during the Battle of Chora, and their combined contributions allowed for a comprehensive and complete overview of the events in June 2007.

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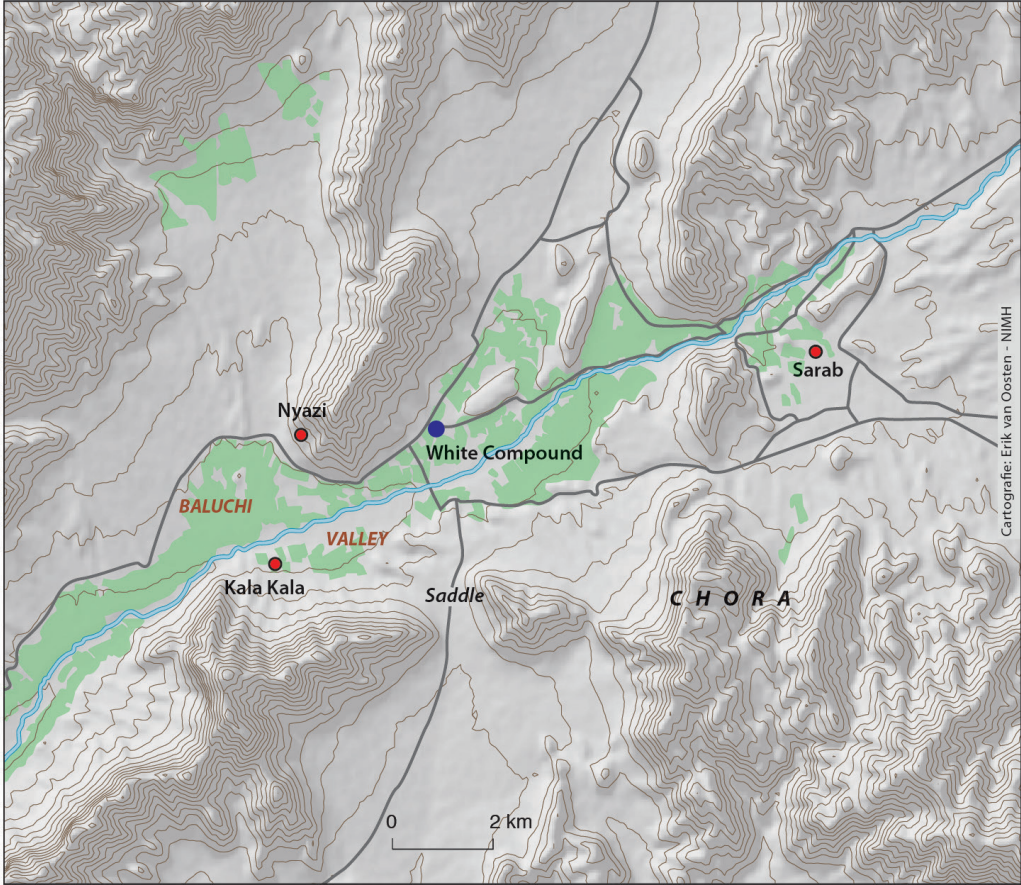
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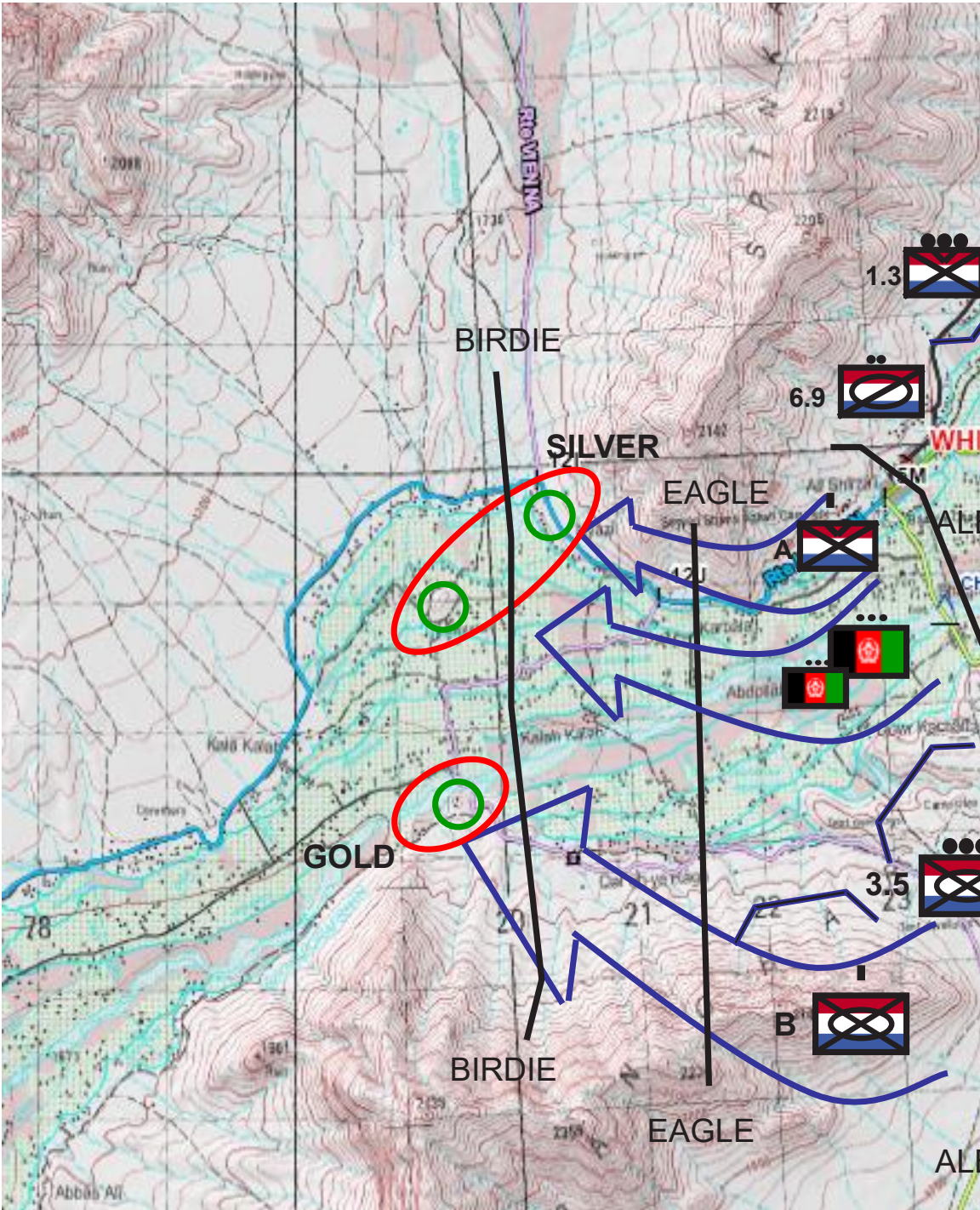
Dehrashan Valley



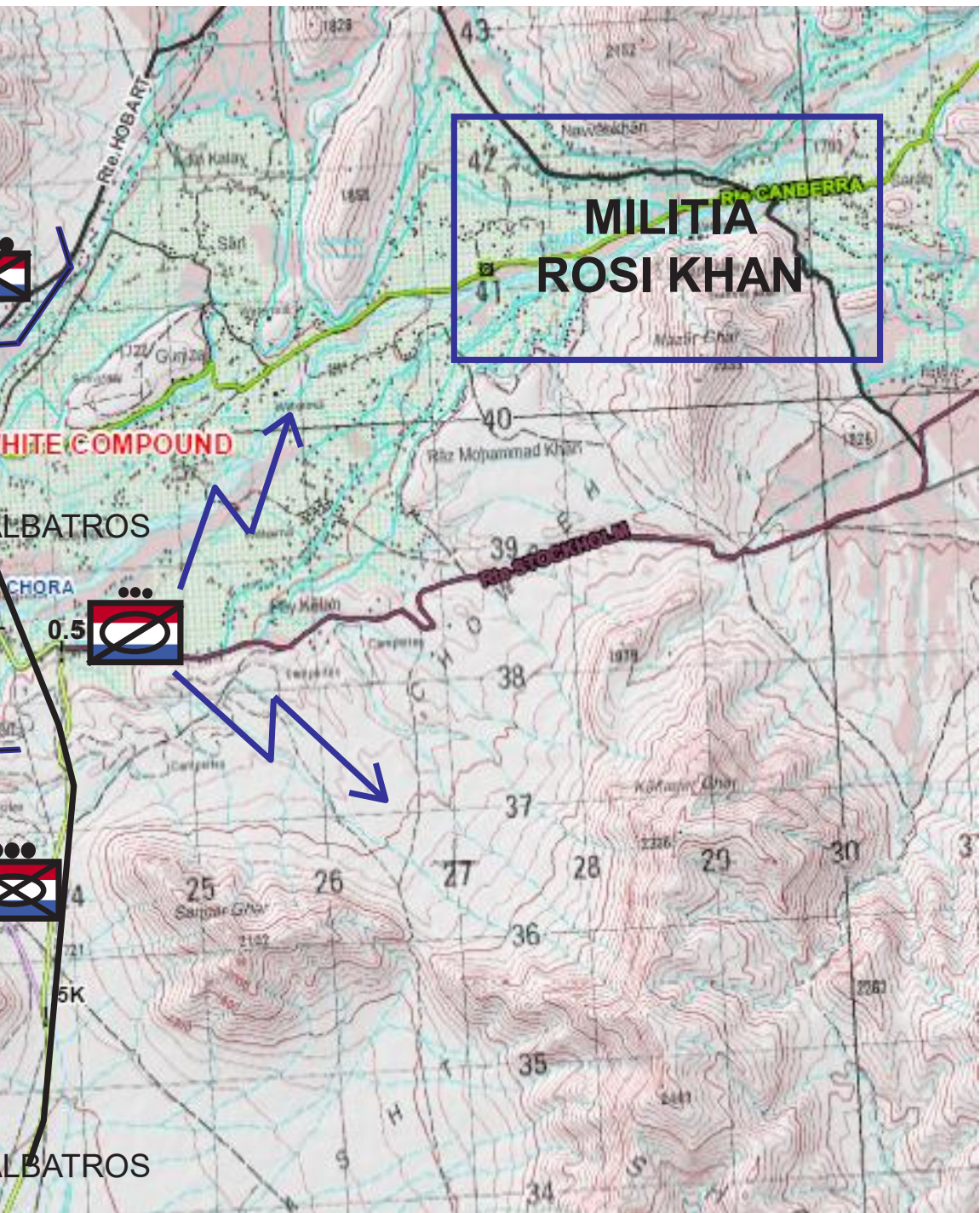
Baluchi Valley



Chora District



Counterattack on June 19, 2007. Personal archive R. Goossens.



Chapter 1 Introduction

In 2007, the Dutch-led Task Force Uruzgan (TFU) executed a battalion-sized military operation in the Chora district, Uruzgan province, Afghanistan, in order to push back enemy forces that threatened to overrun the district. This military operation, known as Operation Troy, was ultimately successful in defeating the anti-coalition militia (ACM)¹ offensive. Soon after, the operation became contentious. Dutch forces were accused of violating international humanitarian law and rules of engagement, starting with a report by the U.S. commander of the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF), primarily focusing on the (visually) unobserved use of ground based fire support in populated areas in the Baluchi valley, where the Chora District Centre is located. The accusations are in stark contrast with the initial reaction by the Dutch Army itself, where the operation was perceived as successful and was branded the “first battalion-sized combat operation since Korea” [meaning the 1950-1953 Korean War], with army staff eager to disseminate the account of the battle through a series of presentations in Dutch Army barracks, dubbed the ‘Chora road show’. The then Dutch Minister of Defence, Eimert van Middelkoop, emphasised that Dutch troops in Uruzgan had made history in Chora.²

Furthermore, the events near Chora refuelled the political discussion in the Netherlands regarding the nature of the ISAF-campaign. Members of Parliament made a dichotomous distinction between the ‘combat mission’ of the U.S.-led Operation Enduring Freedom (OEF) and the reconstructive (peace support) nature of the NATO-led ISAF mission.³ Although Dutch politicians and policy makers for that reason carefully avoided the word ‘counterinsurgency’ (COIN) in describing the deployment of Dutch forces in Uruzgan in 2006-2010, the TFU was in fact “conforming to the definition [of counterinsurgency] every day.”⁴ As Dutch politicians did not agree on the characterisation of the mission in Uruzgan, neither could the TFU’s commanding officer deduce from the political instructions what exactly would constitute a successful deployment. With little guidance from either the government, coalition partners or ISAF headquarters, much of the decision making fell on the shoulders of the successive commanding officers of the TFU and their staff, including during the decision making in the lead-up to the Battle of Chora.⁵

The Battle of Chora is the seminal battalion-sized combat operation of the Dutch Army in the post-Cold War era so far. For some, the event figures as a redeeming event for the Dutch Army post-Srebrenica.⁶ As such, much has been written on the issue. The main criticism of this occasional

1 Although the terms ‘Taliban’, ‘Opposing Military Forces’ (OMF) and ‘Anti-Coalition Militia’ (ACM) are often used interchangeably, this occasional paper opts to use ‘Anti-Coalition Militia’ as its preferred term.

2 “Nederlanders Schreven Geschiedenis in Chora”, *Trouw*, 06/07/2007 see: <https://www.trouw.nl/nieuws/nederlanders-schreven-geschiedenis-in-chora-b6768co8/> accessed 25/04/2021.

3 Dimitriu, G. and Graaf, B. de, (2010). “The Dutch COIN approach: three years in Uruzgan, 2006–2009.” *Small wars & Insurgencies* 21(3): pp 429-458, p. 432.

4 Brocades Zaalberg, T.W. (2007). “Hearts and Minds of Search and Destroy? Leren van klassieke counter-insurgency.” *Militaire Spectator* 176(7/8): pp 288-301.

5 Grandia, M. (2015). *Deadly embrace: the decision paths to Uruzgan and Helmand*, Faculty of Social and Behavioural Sciences, Leiden University, pp. 139-148.

6 Kitzen, M.W.M., Rietjens, S., and Osinga, F. (2013). “Soft Power, the Hard Way: Adaptation by the Netherlands’ *Task Force Uruzgan*.” Farrel, T., Osinga, F. and Russell, J.A. *Military adaptation in Afghanistan* (p. 159-191), Stanford University Press, p. 176.

paper on the present discourse concerning the Battle of Chora is the lack of a comprehensive, evidence-based and academic account on the chain of events. This occasional paper strives to correct this lacuna. Importantly, the aim of the research is to provide an accurate overview of the military decision making process and the execution of the various operations during the Battle of Chora, and as such the scope of this research does not include the legal ramifications of the escalation of force.

In order for the reconstruction to be as accurate as possible, this paper draws from a variety of sources. These include parliamentary papers, interviews, two surveys amongst Operational Mentoring and Liason Team (OMLT)-practitioners, personal archives, photo material, emails and other primary and secondary sources. The secondary sources include dissertations, books and articles, earlier (partial) reconstructions of the Battle of Chora, including the supporting narrative for the battle honours procedure of the infantry regiment 'Limburgse Jagers' (RLJ), the infantry regiment 'Stoottroepen Prins Bernhard' (RSPB), and both Dutch artillery corps, 'Korps Veldartillerie' and 'Korps Rijdende Artillerie'. Also utilised were supporting documents -among which earlier studies by researchers of the Netherlands Institute of Military History- released by the commission tasked with decorations for bravery.⁷ These documents generally provided a great source as they were partially based on research in the TFU-archives, but were limited by the nature of their intent. This occasional paper builds on those documents in order to provide a broader, more nuanced and critical review of the Battle of Chora.

As of yet, no comprehensive reconstruction of the decision making process and the execution of the Battle of Chora has been published, despite repetitive publicity surrounding the chain of events.⁸ Moreover, the accounts of the Battle of Chora that have been presented over the last years were mostly incomplete, as they were in support of the awarding process of regimental battle honours or individual gallantry medals. In all accounts of the Battle of Chora, an outstanding omission has been the narrative of the Afghan National Army (ANA) and its Dutch mentors of the OMLT. Moreover, the role of the Dutch Special Forces Task Force 'Viper' is also underrepresented, notwithstanding the significant role of the Dutch Special Forces detachment.⁹ Importantly, the Battle of Chora has often been depicted as a rather solitary event. Rather, the Battle of Chora was the culmination of a process that was in the making for weeks, if not months, and its effect continued to last for some months after events culminated halfway June 2007. To understand the rationale behind the decisions that led to the Battle of Chora, one must comprehend the factors and actors that shaped the security situation in Uruzgan province and the whole of southern Afghanistan since the summer of 2006.

■

7 In Dutch: Commissie Dapperheidsonderscheidingen Commando Landstrijdkrachten, CDO-CLAS.

8 For instance, an early attempt by Peter van den Aker to analyse the effectivity of Dutch military operations using the Battle of Chora was largely based on single (open) source data, was methodologically flawed and unable to overcome suspicions of author's bias. See: Aker, P.J.E.J. van der (2009). *Tussen waakzaamheid en wederopbouw, Nederlandse Militaire Operaties in Afghanistan*, Research Paper Faculty of Militaire Sciences, Netherlands Defence Academy.

9 One of the authors of this occasional paper has been involved as a practitioner during 2007. The lack of a discourse on the OMLT is, besides this occasional paper, addressed through his PhD and a book on the Dutch OMLTs in Afghanistan (Leeuwenburg, L.J. and Wiltenburg, I.L. (2022 forthcoming), *Met Geweer en Geduld. Trainen, Adviseren en Vechten met het Afghaanse Leger in Uruzgan*, Boom uitgeverij Amsterdam.

For this occasional paper, key personnel involved in the events surrounding Chora have been interviewed, including the TFU commander and the commanding officer of the Dutch Battlegroup (BG) and the Provincial Reconstruction Team (PRT). Also, two of the BG's company commanders involved in the fighting, thirteen field grade officers and NCOs involved in the episode, and all six OMLT-members involved in the counter-offensive have contributed to the data by means of interviews. The interviews were conducted in a semi-structured fashion, transcribed and coded. The interviews that were used for this paper are part of a broader research effort on combat mentoring, with this data set doubling as primary source for this paper. The interviews were of a focused nature, as all interviewees were closely involved in the Chora operation. Moreover, elite interviews were held with the senior commanding officers during the Battle of Chora, providing a unique overview of the decision-making process prior to and during the hostilities.

As most TFU archives are still classified, they could not be included in this paper. The data is therefore validated through multiple secondary sources that refer to these archives.

Lastly, one of the authors of this paper was involved in the Battle of Chora himself during his first deployment as an officer. This has significant advantages, due to the author's field experience and ability to tap into his extended military network. However, as the author is part of the institution under study, it may be possible that that he has preconceived ideas based on his experience. To mitigate the influence of his experiences on the conclusion of this occasional paper, the parts that he was directly involved in were validated by other primary and secondary sources, and these sections were authored by the co-writer to mitigate any bias. Moreover, feedback was received by a small circle of (officer-) scholars to ensure the proper scientific distance when assessing the subject of this research.

This occasional paper will start off by introducing the road to Afghanistan for the Dutch armed forces in chapter 2, followed by the orientation of the opposing military forces and other power brokers in Uruzgan in chapter 3. Then, in chapter 4, all relevant TFU subsidiaries will be introduced. Chapter 5 and 6 will elaborate on the decision making process and and execution of the defensive operations in Chora, with chapter 7 analysing the reasons behind the continuing interest in the Battle of Chora. This paper will conclude with recommendations for future research in chapter 8.

Chapter 2 The road to Afghanistan

In December 2005, Dutch parliament was informed by the Dutch government about the upcoming mission to Uruzgan.¹⁰ The Dutch contribution to ISAF Stage Three (Southern Afghanistan) was mandated in order to improve the stability and security, increase support of the local population for the Afghan authorities, and to decrease the support to the Taliban and associated armed groups.¹¹

The initial NATO campaign plan for ISAF, approved in 2004 by the North Atlantic Council (NAC), focused on the ISAF deployments in the North and West of Afghanistan. For these areas, the 2004 campaign plan was deemed still sufficient. In relation to the 2006 extension of the ISAF-mission in the south and later the east of Afghanistan, where the security situation was less permissive compared to the other parts of the country, it was assessed imperative to adjust the campaign plan. This adjusted campaign plan had been approved by the NAC in 2005 and would be implemented in 2006. The overall goal of the ISAF deployment remained unaltered: assisting the Afghan government by improving stability and security. However, the adjusted campaign plan would allow ISAF, including the Dutch forces, to operate in a more robust way if the situation so demanded. This would include the “execution of offensive operations against armed opponents when deemed necessary in order to improve the local security situation”.¹² It was assessed that the improvement of good governance, efficient host nation security forces and the implementation of the rule of law would form important parts of this operation. To this end, Dutch ISAF personnel would also be tasked with “enabling rebuilding activities and conducting CIMIC and reconstruction activities”.¹³

The integration of efforts between the Afghan security services and the Dutch army efforts was emphasised in the letter to Dutch Parliament. The Dutch concept of operations recognised a population-centric approach for the Dutch military presence as key to a successful mission. To this end, the Dutch would “show respect for all parts of the population, have an open attitude, and conduct ‘presence patrols’ and have extensive contact with the population”.¹⁴ Any patrols and possible offensive operations would, in principle, always be conducted in close cooperation with the Afghan security forces.¹⁵

After the Dutch government had communicated its intent in taking part in the extension of the ISAF campaign earlier in 2005¹⁶, several reconnaissance detachments travelled to Uruzgan

10 For further reading regarding the political process leading to the Dutch participation to the ISAF mission in Uruzgan, see: Hazelbag, L.J. (2009). “Political decision making of the mission in Uruzgan, a reconstruction. NLDA Press, Breda; Weger, M., Osinga, F., & Kirkels, H. (2009). Complex operations: studies on Lebanon (2006) and Afghanistan (2006-present), pp. 251-276; Grandia. Deadly embrace: the decision paths to Uruzgan and Helmand pp. 113-152

11 Ducheine, P. and Pouw, E (2012). 3. Legitimizing the use of force. Legal bases for operations Enduring Freedom and ISAF. *Mission Uruzgan: collaborating in multiple coalitions for Afghanistan*, Amsterdam University Press: pp. 33-46.

12 Parliamentary Papers II, 2005-06, 27925, 193; p. 13.

13 Ibid, p. 3.

14 Ibid, p. 14.

15 Ibid, p. 14.

16 Parliamentary Papers II, 2004-05, 27925, p. 158.

province for a fact-finding mission. The first, a four man strong contingent of a National Intelligence Support Team (NIST), arrived in the provincial capital Tarin Kowt on the May 11, 2005. Its objective was to gather data on the terrain, the people, the Afghan governmental structures and coalition forces already present in the area. The report produced by this reconnaissance party stated that in Uruzgan, the security situation was deteriorating.¹⁷ A subsequent fact finding mission by Dutch Special Operations Forces (SOF) reiterated this message. The commandos scouted the area together with Australian and U.S. SOF already in Uruzgan, and concluded that the main effort would be combating the Taliban, and that little reconstruction had taken place. In fact, the detachment of the Korps Commandotroepen (KCT), as the main exponent of Dutch SOF capacity, stated that Uruzgan was “Taliban’s home turf” and that serious fighting would have to precede stabilising and securing the province.¹⁸ Notwithstanding this assessment, the Dutch government would ultimately agree to the deployment, although a significant effort was made to convince predominantly progressive political parties that the focus would lie on reconstruction efforts that would be made to improve the lives of the people in Uruzgan. The political discussion regarding the dichotomy between a ‘reconstruction mission’ and a ‘combat mission’ would be a recurring event over the next few years, although both terms are non-existent within the Dutch military discourse and doctrine.¹⁹

After a Deployment Task Force paved the way in the first half of 2006, the first TFU, under command of Colonel Theo Vleugels, started operations in Uruzgan in August 2006. In this period, the TFU intended to pursue a classical counterinsurgency campaign, based on the ideas of theorists such as David Galula, Frank Kitson and Robert Thompson.²⁰ The ‘clear-hold-build’ adage which was often used has its roots in Thompson’s writings.²¹ It denotes that the counterinsurgency force would have to first ‘clear’ an area of insurgents, followed by a period of ‘holding’ the area using armed force, which was to be used to ‘build’ the relationship between the local populace and the government. The latter aspect was executed in multiple ways and it was commonly known as ‘winning hearts and minds’ (WHAM). Indeed, all classical COIN-theorists stressed the importance of the local population, as without local support an insurgency would have little chance of succeeding.

Two Afghan Development Zones (ADZ) were identified around the main Uruzgan towns of Tarin Kowt and Deh Rawood. TFU-1 intended to establish a strong foothold in these areas, gradually expanding their influence in the spirit of French general Hubert Lyautey’s theories (1854-1934), for which he used the metaphor of a *tache d’huile*.²² Early attempts by the TFU to win the hearts and minds of the local population included plans to stay and live with the local population, which

17 Cate, A. ten and Vorm, M. van der (2016). *Callsign Nassau. Dutch Special Forces in Action in the ‘new World Disorder’*, Leiden University Press, p. 230.

18 Ibid, p. 231.

19 Kitzen et al., “Soft Power, the Hard Way”, p. 170, 176; Parliamentary Papers II, 27925, 203; Griensven, H. van, (2007), “It’s all about the Afghan people: Eén jaar 1 (NLD/AUS) ‘Task Force Uruzgan’”, *Atlantisch Perspectief* Vol. 31, No. 6, pp. 4-10.

20 For further reading on this subject see: Kitson, F. (1971). *Low Intensity Operations. Subversion, Insurgency, Peace-Keeping*, Faber; Thompson, L. (2002). *The Counter Insurgency Manual*, Frontline Books; Galula, D. (2006). *Counterinsurgency Warfare: Theory and Practice*, Greenwood Publishing Group.

21 For a comparison of classical counterinsurgency theorists see: Huizing, M. (2012) “Basisprincipes van klassieke counterinsurgency.” *Militaire Spectator* 181(2) pp. 44-58.

22 Tjepkema, A. (2008). “Lyautey en de inktvlek.” *Militaire Spectator* 177(12): pp. 685-695.

would include ‘platoon houses’ in the populated green zone.²³ For tactical reasons however, -being close to the population would mean a high risk of close combat with infiltrating ACM, and thus casualties-, these platoon houses were relocated to the high grounds further out, resulting in the patrol bases (PB) of Poentjak (Dehrashan Valley) and Volendam (north of Deh Rawood), which were rather ineffective due to the distance from the local population.²⁴

The leadership of the first Battlegroup (BG) understood that any permanent presence aiming to increase the area of influence -known as ‘the ink blot’- should be located at the edges of the *tache d’huile*.²⁵ Chora District Centre – further to the north – was certainly out of the area of influence at that time. Still, the Afghan government had a local presence in Chora, enforced by a number of Afghan National Police (ANP) checkpoints, as well as a government building in Ali Shirzai, the main town in the Chora district. The government building, residence of the Chora district governor Ibrahim, quickly became known as the ‘White Compound’, as its white paint stood out from the mud walls of most qualas in Ali Shirzai.

Chora is one of the five districts of Uruzgan, together with the districts of Tarin Kowt (middle), Khas Uruzgan (east), Char Cineh (northwest) and Deh Rawood (west). The main bodies of provincial government are located in the province’s capital Tarin Kowt. The district of Gizab (north) is considered a sixth administrative unit, that had been officially transferred from the Daykundi province in 2006. The total population of this southern Afghan province (excluding Gizab) was, according to the 2006 ‘Context Analysis Uruzgan Province’, 312,800 people, of whom 35,000 lived in the Chora district. The population was spread out over about a 100 small villages, hamlets and homesteads scattered over the district.²⁶ The largest village is Ali Shirzai, which also doubles as the district’s capital. The population of Chora holds a diversity of tribal backgrounds, which can be divided between Achakzai (43%), Popolzai (30%), Barakzai (25%) and Hazara (2%).

Geographically, Chora is split up in the northern area, which is called Chora as well, and where Ali Shirzai is located. The southern part of the district is Chenartu, named after its main village of the same name. This is one of the two unofficial districts in Uruzgan and largely populated by the Popolzai tribe. In Chenartu, the Popolzai tribe forms a majority, but, as stated above, they are a minority in the Chora district as a whole.²⁷ Tension existed between the Achakzai majority and Popolzai minority in Chora -and the Uruzgan province as a whole- that also played an important role in the first (2006) and second (2007) Battle of Chora, as will be elaborated upon in chapter 3. During the Spring of 2008, the Popolzai-dominated provincial government created Chenartu as an official district, in order to give the Popolzai in this newly formed district direct

23 Sar, P. van der (2007). “Kick the Enemy Where it Hurts Most. De steun van de lokale bevolking, daar gaat het om” *Carré*(1). p. 15.

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

25 Coenen, R. (2007). “Counterinsurgency Operaties: Geen succesvol optreden zonder gedegen kennis.” *Carré*(1): 18-20; Sar, van der. “Kick the Enemy Where it Hurts Most.” p.15.

26 Royal Netherlands Embassy Kabul (2006). *Context Analysis URUZGAN Province* [NATO Unclassified], p. 3, 32.

27 *Ibid.*, p. 24, 33.

access to resources rather than through the non-Popolzai administration of the Chora District.²⁸ Furthermore, within the Ali Shirzai area, there were tensions between Achakzai and Barakzai as well, which would play a role in the local power politics which will be elaborated upon in the following chapter.

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28 Kitzen, M.W.M. (2016). *The Course of Co-option: Co-option of Local Power-holders as a Tool for Obtaining Control Over the Population in Counterinsurgency Campaigns in Weblike Societies: with Case Studies on Dutch Experiences During the Aceh War (1873-c. 1912) and the Uruzgan Campaign (2006-2010)*, Netherlands Defence Academy, p. 350, *The Liaison Office, Three Years Later, A socio-political assessment of Uruzgan Province from 2006 to 2009* (Kabul: TLO, 2009), p. 5, 19.

Chapter 3 The Anti-Coalition Militia: Opposing Forces in Uruzgan in the spring of 2007

The classification of all opposing combatants as Taliban was, and is, a gross oversimplification in describing the violent non-state actors in 2007 Uruzgan. When considering the Taliban, a distinction must also be made between different ‘types’ of Taliban. Thomas Ruttig makes a valuable observation on the structure of the Taliban, as he assesses that the Taliban are formed up around a series of concentric rings with at its core a Taliban leadership of “fighting mullahs”, an inner circle of indoctrinated and highly ideological madrassa students (from refugee camps in Pakistan), and an outer ring of local fighters who have joined the movement for a variety of non-ideological reasons – often tribally based grievances or for economic gain.²⁹ This model indicates that the reasons behind any armed struggle might differ per incident, and should not be attributed to the Taliban out of hand.

In Uruzgan, multiple tribal leaders and other, often former Mujahedin warlords, fought against ISAF, but also amongst each other for influence, money and to destabilise each other’s base of power.³⁰ One of the main power brokers in Uruzgan when the Dutch considered deployment in 2005-2006, was Jan Mohammed Khan, the provincial governor from Popolzai origin. Jan Mohammed Khan was corrupt, involved in drug-trafficking and generally viewed as incompetent as a governor, but he was highly skilled in the complex divide and conquer politics that were common in Uruzgan.³¹ When his diplomatic skills would fall short, Jan Mohammed Khan wouldn’t recoil from the use of brute force. He was very well connected, as he was a close ally of President Karzai, and the uncle and strong supporter of Matiullah Khan, the leader of the Afghan Highway Police (AHP). The AHP was a militia of hundreds of fighters, which controlled the important (and only) partly paved road between Tarin Kowt and Kandahar City. In doing so, Matiullah Khan received funds from all parties who wanted to travel the road safely, including coalition forces.

As Jan Mohammed Khan was the most influential person in Uruzgan, the American and Australian forces present in Uruzgan -preceding the Dutch-led TFU- were content in working with him.³² Jan Mohammed Khan used his influence with ISAF and OEF forces to target a plethora of competitors, tribal leaders and former Taliban fighters to reinforce his position.³³ However, when the Dutch took over in 2006, Jan Mohammed Khan was removed from his position as governor on Dutch initiative, as the Dutch government was not keen on working with a person

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29 Ruttig, T (2007). „Die Taleban nach Mulla Dadullah: Ihre Strukturen, ihr Programm - und ob man mit ihnen reden kann“. SWP-Aktuell (31/07), pp. 2-3.

30 For further reading on provincial politics in Uruzgan during the Dutch involvement in the province, see: Bijlert, M. van (2009). “Unruly commanders and violent power struggles: Taliban networks in Uruzgan”, Giustozzi, A. (ed.) (2009) *Decoding the New Taliban. Insights from the Afghan Field*, Colombia: Hurst; Kitzen. *The Course of Co-option*.

31 Boom, J. (2008), “Veiligheid in Uruzgan”, *De Groene Amsterdammer*, Amsterdam, see: <https://www.groene.nl/artikel/veiligheid-in-uruzgan> accessed 20/04/2021.

32 For further reading on the American involvement prior to 2006, see: Green, D.R. (2012). *The Valley’s Edge: A Year with the Pashtuns in the Heartland of the Taliban*, Potomac Books, Inc.

33 Bijlert, van. “Unruly commanders and violent power struggles”, p. 3.

of such ill reputation.³⁴ He was replaced by Abdul Hakim Munib as governor. However, until his assassination in 2011, Jan Mohammed Khan would remain to exert his influence on events in Uruzgan.

It is important to understand that the Taliban and ISAF were by no means the only variables in the Battle of Chora, which will be elaborated upon in this occasional paper. For instance, in the summer of 2006, the Chora District Centre fell to a hostile opposing force, in what Ten Cate and Van der Vorm call 'the first Battle of Chora'.³⁵ The Chora district reportedly was attacked as a result of a deal between the then district governor Haji Obaidullah and local Taliban.³⁶ It was retaken by U.S. forces carrying out an air assault, with Dutch SOF in support. After this battle, a fragile equilibrium was created, in which the local population could resume their normal pattern of life, however the Taliban was able to freely move through the area.³⁷ Indeed, as analyst/researcher Martine van Bijlert observed, there are "strong indications that across the whole of southwestern Afghanistan such deals -to temporarily allow a district centre to be overrun by Taliban forces- are backed, if not ordered, by local strongmen who have been side-lined in an attempt to illustrate (and increase) the weakness of the local government and to force their reappointment".³⁸

As the 2007 Battle of Chora is further detailed in this paper, it is imperative that the ACM are observed not in the dichotomy of ISAF versus the Taliban, but in this opaque construct of opposing tribal interests, personal grievances by local powerbrokers and short-term opportunism by the local population.

As is common in Afghanistan, tribal leaders and local strongmen have little reticence in shifting alliances when deemed necessary. This observation is relevant for this paper, as a prime example of this occurrence was local leader Rozi Khan, who had served as the provincial chief of the Afghan Police until he was fired -also on Dutch initiative- in 2006.³⁹ In the past, Rozi Khan was linked to the Taliban, and as such he was not considered to be a viable partner to the TFU. Moreover, Jan Mohammed Khan and Rozi Khan were at odds with each other, which resulted in reciprocal violent attacks, albeit with plausible deniability. After Rozi Khan was relieved of his position as the provincial Chief of Police, he remained a powerful figure within his tribal (Barakzai) community, which had its base in the Chora district. The ANP lost its backbone with Rozi Khan's departure, and little potency was left in the service afterwards. Rozi Khan and the militia he commanded would later play a significant role in the Battle of Chora.

In this rather incomprehensible web of provincial power intrigue, the Dutch launched their Task Force in 2006. Although the early deployments did encounter some skirmishes with ACM, especially the SOF detachments deployed from April 2006 onwards, no fatalities were suffered by

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34 Parliamentary Papers II, 2005-2006, 27925, 213; Parliamentary Papers, 2005-06, 19637, 1029 (appendix) 'algemeen'

35 Cate, ten and Vorm, van der. *Callsign Nassau*.

36 Bijlert, van. "Unruly commanders and violent power struggles". p. 16.

37 Kitzen. *The Course of Co-option*, pp. 237-238.

38 Bijlert, van. "Unruly commanders and violent power struggles", p. 15.

39 Green, *The Valley's Edge*, p. 122.

the Dutch armed forces in Uruzgan until the security situation further deteriorated in the spring of 2007, culminating with the Battle of Chora between 15-19 June 2007.⁴⁰

This paper will now continue with the introduction of the TFU and its major subsidiaries, including the BG, the PRT, the artillery detachment, an OMLT and the SOF detachment, which used the designation 'Viper', and was subsequently known as such.⁴¹ Lastly the Afghan National Army (ANA) played an important role in the execution of combat operations during the Battle of Chora and is therefore also introduced in this section.

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40 See: Overzicht Nederlandse slachtoffers, NOS, <https://nos.nl/artikel/151641-overzicht-nederlandse-slachtoffers> accessed 01/05/2021.

41 This occasional paper frequently uses the callsigns of different platoons to distinguish between them. For reasons of readability, company-sized sub-units will be named fully, i.e. A-coy, B-boy etc, whilst platoon-sized elements will be referred to by its callsign.

Chapter 4 The TFU Force Structure

The Task Force Uruzgan was a composite organisation, roughly resembling the brigade structure that is common in most armies. The TFU was however a bespoke force structure organised for Uruzgan. The TFU organisation that was agreed upon consisted of a single composite infantry Battlegroup (battalion-sized) and a PRT formed around a combat or combat support battalion staff, in case of TFU-2 first a cavalry, later an engineer battalion. Complementing the TFU were several other smaller augmentations. These included the artillery detachment, equipped with a heavy 155mm Panzerhaubitze 2000 (PzH2000), the armoured engineer company, an 'Intelligence, Surveillance, Target Acquisition, and Reconnaissance' (ISTAR) detachment, a psychological operations detachment (formed up around an air defence unit) and -informally- the OMLT.⁴² Also, a downsized company of the Dutch SOF, 'Viper', was under TFU command until the end of 2007, and an Australian engineering Reconstruction Task Force (RTF) also reported to the TFU.⁴³ Lastly, several combat service support elements provided logistical support to the TFU and its subsidiary units.

The first TFU commander was hand-picked, but after the first rotation, one of the army brigades would be assigned to provide the commanding officer and the TFU staff. The TFU was commanded by a Colonel (rotations 1-5) or a Brigadier General (rotations 6-8).⁴⁴ Between February 2007 and July 2007, TFU-2 was commanded by Colonel Hans van Griensven, an Engineer Corps officer. Van Griensven served as the chief of staff of 13 Mechanised Brigade in Oirschot before he was tasked to command TFU-2. The BG and the PRT would be commanded by a Lieutenant Colonel, and the OMLT and Viper were commanded by Majors. The OMLT command was upgraded to a Colonel (rotations 4-9) from September 2007 onwards as the Afghan Army presence increased in size, and more ANA battalions -known as 'kandaks'- and the ANA brigade staff also had to be mentored. The Dutch commander of the OMLT detachment responsible for an Afghan infantry kandak however, would remain a Major.

Most TFU force elements would deploy for six months, with the BG as a notable exception. Formed around a (mechanised or air assault) infantry battalion, the BG would rotate every four months. Multiple reasons for this shorter term were given by senior Dutch command. Firstly, the BG was considered to have a more demanding job compared to the more benign PRT or staff efforts. A four month tour would prevent a loss of focus that might occur during a more prolonged deployment. Secondly, as the Dutch initially agreed to only a two-year involvement in

42 The OMLT reported to the Task Force Phoenix, in Kandahar. TF Phoenix was tasked with training, coaching and mentoring the Afghan National Security Forces. Still, Colonel Van Griensven felt a responsibility towards the Dutch soldiers serving within the OMLT (source: interview Van Griensven, (06/07/2020). The OMLT commander was also instructed by Dutch leadership to follow the C-TFU's orders, (source: interview Army officer C, (02/04/2020).

43 After an one and a half year absence of Dutch Special Forces in Uruzgan, the Dutch SOF contingent in 2009 was renamed Task Force 55 and was subordinated to ISAF SOF, and not under TFU command. Although both detachments consisted of Special Forces soldiers, TF Viper and TF-55 had a different organisation and command structure. For further reading, see: Cate, ten and Vorm, van der. *Callsign Nassau*, pp. 236-275.

44 For a list of Dutch commanding officers see Netherlands Institute of Military History (2010), "International Security Assistance Force (ISAF)". Den Haag, <https://www.defensie.nl/downloads/brochures/2010/06/07/international-security-assistance-force-isaf> accessed 01/05/2021.

Uruzgan, several senior officers admitted that a four month rotation would allow more battalions to have a tour in Afghanistan.⁴⁵ Indeed, after decades of low-level peacekeeping operations in the Balkan region, the Dutch Army was eager to prove itself in the demanding Afghan war zone, and shorter tours would mean that most battalions could be deployed. Lastly, by restricting the period to four months, the Dutch Ministry of Defence could avoid logistical efforts related to furlough-entitlement under six-month deployments. The deployment of the different PRT and OMLT rotations varied from four to over seven months, with both units' rotations extended after ISAF pressure.

4.1 The Battlegroup

The BG was formed around a Dutch infantry battalion, although one or more companies would typically be traded with another battalion to create a mix of capabilities. During the Uruzgan deployment, the Dutch Armed Forces had mechanised and light infantry (Air Assault or Marine Corps) capacity, and by trading out companies to each other, each BG would have both specialisations in its force structure. Also, considering the terrain in Uruzgan, the light battalions had to switch to 4x4s and wheeled armoured vehicles. Patrolling a province the size of Uruzgan on foot was an impossibility, and helicopters were a scarce commodity, so the BG's companies had to convert to the use of (different) vehicles.

For the third rotation, in the spring of 2007, BG-3 was formed around the staff of 42 Armoured Infantry Battalion 'Limburgse Jagers' (42 BLJ). 42 BLJ contributed two infantry companies, and 13 Air Assault Battalion 'Stoottroepen Prins Bernhard' one company. 42 BLJ was stationed in Seedorf, Germany, and would be redeployed to the Netherlands shortly before the deployment. The dispersed location of the TFU staff (Oirschot, the Netherlands) and BG-3 contributed to a very limited cooperation and hardly any mutual pre-deployment training between the battalion and TFU headquarters before arriving in Uruzgan. Not only originated 42 BLJ from a different brigade, the difference in the deployment period for the TFU and the BG meant that the TFU was already in theatre for two months when BG-3 arrived at the end of March 2007. The majority of training TFU-2 had conducted had thus been with BG-2. BG-2 was formed around the staff of 17 Armoured Infantry Battalion 'Garderegiment Fuseliers Prinses Irene', which was also located in Oirschot, where the TFU-2 staff had prepared for its deployment.

In 2007, 42 BLJ was commanded by Lieutenant-Colonel Rob Querido, and he had spent the better part of 2006 preparing for the upcoming deployment with his battalion. He could not take his entire unit, however, as 42 BLJ had to detach its A-Coy to 12 Battalion for their BG-8 rotation during 2008-2009. In return, the C-Coy of 13 Battalion, a light infantry battalion (Air Assault), was attached to BG-3. C-Coy 13 Infbat was commanded by Captain Larry Hamers, an experienced and well-regarded officer, as well as a Dutchbat III-veteran, as he deployed to the Srebrenica enclave in eastern Bosnia in 1995 whilst serving with 13 Battalion as a platoon commander. In the BG-3 force structure, Hamers' company would be redesignated as A-Coy, to fill the gap of the company that

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45 Interview Army generals AA, AB, 30/11/2020.

was detached. A-Coy consisted of a staff-element, three infantry platoons, a mortar group and a sniper squad, with the Chora District as their area of operations from May 2007 onwards. The other infantry companies were commanded by Captain Ralf Goossens (B-Coy) and Captain Guy van Boheemen (C-Coy). Both companies had four infantry platoons available and respectively received Tarin Kowt and Deh Rawood as their area of operations. All three companies also had 81mm mortar groups, with three tubes per group available for indirect fire support.⁴⁶

A-Coy (13 RSPB) Chora DC	B-Coy (42 RLJ) Tarin Kowt	C-Coy (42 RLJ) Deh Rawood
Infantry platoon CS 1.1	Infantry platoon CS 2.4	Infantry platoon CS 3.4
Infantry platoon CS 1.2	Infantry platoon CS 2.5	Infantry platoon CS 3.5
Infantry platoon CS 1.3	Infantry platoon CS 2.6	Infantry platoon CS 3.6
Sniper group CS Sierra	Infantry platoon CS 2.7	Infantry platoon CS 3.7

Figure 1: the break-up of the company callsigns

Other major assets available to the BG companies included the antediluvian YPR tracked infantry fighting vehicle, armed with a 25mm autocannon, and wheeled armoured vehicles, armed with a machine gun (Patria, Bushmaster). Additionally, Querido had the battalion reconnaissance platoon, callsign (CS)⁴⁷ 0.5, to his disposal, which was equipped with the modern Fennek reconnaissance vehicle and Mercedes Benz 4x4 armed with an automatic grenade launcher. The ISTAR reconnaissance platoon (CS 6.9) was also part of the TFU force structure, and was equipped similarly to the BG's reconnaissance platoon.⁴⁸

Importantly, combat engineer squads were attached to platoons or companies in order to search the roads for improvised explosive devices (IEDs). Although very important to BG operations as the threat from IEDs was increasing, they did not operate independently, and as such should be considered part of the callsigns.⁴⁹ Thus equipped, the BG led by Querido took over from its predecessors on March 31.

4.2 The Provincial Reconstruction Team

PRTs were an American concept dating from the earlier stages of the OEF campaign, a tool for supporting the state-building process by providing economic development as well as security.⁵⁰ The Provincial Reconstruction Team was the main TFU instrument to promote the reconstruction efforts in Uruzgan, and was structured around a combat/combat support battalion staff. 41 Armoured Engineer Battalion was the core of PRT-3 in spring 2007,

46 Organisation Table BG-3, personal archive Army officer I, accessed 02/05/2021.

47 For reasons of readability, this occasional paper opts to use callsign designations to refer to platoon-sized elements. All other sub-units, units and formations are named fully.

48 Formally under TFU command, as the ISTAR detachment was part of the TFU force structure. As both the role and equipment were highly similar, and the role of the ISTAR reconnaissance platoon was quite limited during the Battle of Chora, the platoon (CS 6.9) is mentioned in this section.

49 See also chapter 5 for a more elaborate discussion on the force structure of Dutch callsigns.

50 Kitzen. *The Course of Co-option*, pp. 358-359.

led by then Lieutenant Colonel Gino van der Voet. The first rotations of the PRT lasted four months, but by the time Van der Voet took command, the rotation period had been set to six months. Van der Voet only had a skeleton crew of around 60 personnel in his PRT, limiting his capacity, but the TFU had been reinforced by a significant Australian RTF detachment, including engineers and force protection platoons, adding 400 troops.⁵¹ The Australians would build and secure a number of projects in cooperation with the Dutch PRT's command, but most importantly, the relations with Afghan government personnel, local power brokers and other influential Afghan nationals would go through the Dutch PRT's staff. These included informal contacts -officially, the TFU was not allowed to cooperate with such entities- with prominent local (informal) leadership such as Rozi Khan, Matiullah Khan and Jan Mohammed Khan.

Van der Voet was well acquainted with the TFU-2 commander, as they both were long serving officers in the small Dutch Engineer Corps. Van Griensven had changed the role of the PRT when he took command, as PRT-1 and PRT-2 had been subservient to BG efforts, with the first BG promoting classical COIN concepts to the TFU-1 staff, using infantry platoons as the main proponents of its approach.⁵² Moreover, PRT-1 and -2 were based around tank battalion staffs, and both units had to recalibrate from heavy armour conventional combat to reconstruction efforts during COIN. Van Griensven decided that the PRT would be leading the TFU effort, with the BG in support of the overall mission, and was rather vocal in his opinion that the TFU was in fact one large PRT as far as he was concerned.⁵³ Although this was agreed on by all, in practise some debate was present on which unit actually held prominence during operations.⁵⁴ Van der Voet's initial objective was to reinforce the TFU's influence in the Dehrashan Valley north of Tarin Kowt, as the rapport between the Dutch forces and part of the Dehrashan's population was unresponsive to the TFU. The increasing tension in the Chora district changed the TFU's focus -and thus the PRT's- to the Baluchi Valley and Ali Sherzai, with the PRT as key intermediary between Chora's local power brokers and the TFU. Furthermore, Van der Voet understood the importance of understanding local (tribal) politics, and as such put significant effort in getting acquainted with Uruzgan leadership.

4.3 Task Force Viper

Task Force Viper was the designation of the Dutch Special Operations Forces detachment, attached to the TFU. Consisting of four teams and a staff element, TF Viper totalled 56 operators and were commanded by Major René van den Berg.⁵⁵ The SOF soldiers were highly trained, and equipped with modified Mercedes 4x4s and a variety of small arms. During the first TF Viper rotations, the partners of choice were the Australian SF operators of the Australian Special Air

51 The Australian RTF was renamed the Mentoring and Reconstruction Task Force (MRTF) in 2008, and again the Mentoring Task Force in 2010, when they formally started mentoring the ANA soldiers of the 4th ANA Brigade in Uruzgan. Although feasibly confusing, in 2007 it was designated the RTF.

52 Sar, P. van der. "Kick the Enemy Where it Hurts Most." pp. 12-14.

53 Kitzen. *The Course of Co-option*, p. 404.

54 Interviews Colonel Querido with JP van der Meer, 20/02/2014, 20/06/2014. Both interviews were cleared for publication by both Brigadier General Querido and Van der Meer.

55 Cate, ten and Vorm, van der. *Callsign Nassau*, p. 244.

Service Regiment, better known as Task Force 637. However, the Dutch government prohibited participation in U.S.-led counterterrorism efforts in Afghanistan. This led to a precarious dilemma for the Dutch SOF, although in general TF Viper was able to circumvent the national restrictions by rephrasing their efforts as 'support to the Australian SF by ISAF-assets'.⁵⁶ The Dutch SOF detachment was well acquainted with Chora and its surroundings having participated in the 'first Battle of Chora', the June 2006 skirmish in the district, together with the Australian special forces. In 2007 however, the Australian Special Air Service Regiment had returned from an absence in the Uruzgan province, as Task Force 66 (TF-66), and the TFU and TF Viper were in the process of reacquainting. Although TF Viper would not be present in the Baluchi Valley during the (second) Battle of Chora, the SOF soldiers would be heavily involved in simultaneous combat actions to the south of the Baluchi Pass in support of the Battle. The SOF were able to field about a platoon-sized element, and due to the SOF-background - being the highest qualified soldiers in the Dutch Army and Royal Netherlands Marine Corps-, Viper was often used when C-TFU needed a quick fix to an emergent problem somewhere in the province.⁵⁷

4.4 The Operational Mentoring and Liaison Team

In the period 2006-2010, the Dutch Armed Forces deployed Operational Mentoring and Liaison Teams, or OMLTs, in Afghanistan. This instrument was a direct result of the expansion of the NATO-led ISAF operation into the south of Afghanistan. With the implementation of a new ISAF campaign plan, more emphasis was placed on the reinforcement of the Afghan security services, both the Afghan National Army as well as the different Afghan Police institutions. This would affect the Dutch force structure in Afghanistan, as the Dutch armed forces would include an OMLT in support of the Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF). In its letter to Parliament, the Dutch Cabinet stated that the ANA would be supported by a single Dutch OMLT, which would train, monitor and mentor the ANA battalions.⁵⁸ With the addition of the Dutch OMLT to the ISAF campaign, an (eventual) four year effort was initiated to train, advise and assist the Afghan National Army in the Uruzgan and Kandahar provinces.

The Dutch OMLT would constitute of a small cadre of officers and NCOs. The first three OMLTs would consist of maximal 24 service members, led by a Major. By this time however, most Dutch combat units were already committed to Uruzgan, as each infantry battalion already had received a slot in the BG rotation scheme. Moreover, the combat support units were pilfered to provide the command structure of the PRTs and to fill in the gaps in the TFU and Regional Command South (RC/S) staffs. This led to a staffing predicament for the OMLTs. In 2006, the mentoring mission was understood to be a mirror-image of the exploitations of Operational Detachment Alpha 595 (U.S. Army), in what was later dubbed by Steve Biddle as the 'Afghan model of operations'.⁵⁹ This

56 Ibid, p. 244.

57 For an extensive narrative about the role of Dutch Special Operations Forces during the Afghanistan Campaign, see: Cate, ten and Vorm, van der. *Callsign Nassau*.

58 Parliamentary Papers II, 2006-06, 27925, 193 see: https://www.parlement.com/9291000/d/uruzganbesluit_2005.pdf, p.15, accessed 22/04/2021.

59 Biddle, S.D.J.I.S. (2006). "Allies, airpower, and modern warfare: The Afghan model in Afghanistan and Iraq." *International Security* 30(3): pp. 161-176.

would imply that independent embedded training teams would fight together with the ANA, with little if any coalition support on the ground, whilst providing the essential pivot between the local armed forces and coalition air assets, ground based fire support and aero-medevac.

The early Dutch OMLT thus encountered both conceptual as well as organisational issues. Observing Dutch doctrine, this type of operation would be within the special forces realm, as military assistance was one of the SOF's main tasks.⁶⁰ With the KCT already committed in Uruzgan, 11 Airmobile Brigade and the Royal Netherlands Marine Corps were ordered to provide the OMLT. However, little was known about the type of work the OMLT would perform in Afghanistan.⁶¹ The first OMLT commander, eager to recruit the right personnel for the tasks at hand, compiled a list of demands which would be held against the experience and capabilities of OMLT-applicants. This list detailed OMLT-personnel to have experience within either an infantry or a reconnaissance unit, and experience as a platoon sergeant for NCOs and platoon or company commander for officers.⁶² Recruiting veteran soldiers with such expertise would imply a high level of independence, tactical nous and flexibility, which was considered paramount by the first OMLT commander. However, with the Army heavily committed and the Marine Corps not willing to break up its battalions in anticipation of a future deployment, no singular unit could be found to staff the OMLT. As a result, a composite unit was formed on the basis of volunteers who happened to be available. This team of volunteers, described by the first commanding officer as "adventurers and adrenaline-seekers", did however not always meet the demands as formulated for OMLT-personnel.⁶³ It proved impossible to correct the staffing issues, as the OMLTs were considered a low priority by the Directorate of Operations, and Army HQ was generally content with a quantitative staffing rather than bothering over qualitative issues.⁶⁴

By 2007, in the third rotation, OMLT-III was staffed by six Army officers and NCOs, and 12 Marine Corps officers and NCOs, and commanded by Army Major Stephan Bossmann, the commanding officer of the Pathfinder Platoon of 11 AMB. Bossmann was temporarily promoted from Captain to Major for the duration of the deployment. Bossmann had genuine concerns as half his Army team were not infantrymen, but drawn from other branches of the Army. A crash-course in small unit tactics during pre-deployment training relieved some of his concerns, but the limitations of the OMLT were communicated to Van Griensven by the commanding officer of 11 Airmobile Brigade, Brigadier General Marc van Uhm.⁶⁵

During pre-deployment training, the officers of the OMLT observed compatibility issues with the Army and Marine detachments. Not having enough time to iron out the differences in tactics,

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60 Land Warfare Centre Koninklijke Landmacht (2014). *Landoperaties Doctrine Publicatie 3.2*. Amersfoort; Wiltenburg, I.L. and Kitzen, M.W.M. (2020). "What's in a Name: Clarifying the Divide Between Military Assistance and Security Force Assistance." *Small Wars Journal* (September 2020).

61 Wiltenburg, I.L. (2019). "Security Force Assistance: Practised but not Substantiated." *Militaire Spectator* 188(2): pp. 89-99.

62 Interview Army officer J, 30/07/2019.

63 Interview Army officer J, 30/07/2019. During the research, all OMLT commanders have been interviewed. Of those, all observed sub-par staffing of the OMLTs, mostly concerning the earlier rotations and the Brigade staff OMLT.

64 Interview Army General K, 30/11/2020.

65 Internal Memorandum addressed to Lt-Gen Peter van Uhm from the C-11 AMB, Brigadier General Marc van Uhm, personal archives Army officer C.

techniques and procedures, it was decided to divide the OMLT over service lines.⁶⁶ Therefore, after arriving in Afghanistan in May 2007, the Marines were ordered to man the Dutch OMLT positions in Deh Rawood and Kandahar, therefore playing no further role in the forthcoming Battle of Chora. The Army component of the OMLT would be located at Kamp Holland in Tarin Kowt, the main Dutch Base in Uruzgan. Considering that the Army contingent was only a six-man strong detachment, Bossmann ordered one of the senior Marine NCOs to enhance the OMLT's numbers in Tarin Kowt for administrative duties.

Lacking a mission statement, Bossmann had to consider how to employ both the ANA and his team to their best ability.⁶⁷ As the OMLT only consisted of six junior officers and NCOs, Bossmann reverted back to type. An experienced and aggressive small-unit leader, he intended to focus on independent platoon and company patrols by the ANA, thereby supporting the TFU COIN efforts.⁶⁸ Despite Bossmann's capability to lead troops, he had not worked at a battalion or brigade staff before. Indeed, the vast majority of OMLT-III, including the Marine detachment, consisted of junior officers and NCOs. Considering the qualitative and quantitative limitations of the OMLT, mentoring the ANA kandak staff adequately seemed unfeasible.

Recognising that 'mentoring' Afghan officers and NCOs in the staffs would not constitute to a productive mission, Bossmann resorted to intensive patrolling, which was more in his comfort zone. Moreover, it was warranted given the growing pressure from opposing forces in Uruzgan in the spring of 2007. Bossmann organised the Army OMLT into two teams, so two ANA-patrols could be accompanied simultaneously. Typically, the OMLT would be equipped with a Mercedes Benz (MB) 4x4, offering space for the three OMLT members and an interpreter. The MBs were equipped with machine guns, and one of the vehicles had a 40mm Automatic Grenade Launcher installed.

4.5 The Afghan National Army

During the tenure of OMLT-III, more Afghan soldiers started to trickle into Uruzgan. As the first Afghan patrols were very limited in size, not exceeding a platoon, the reinforcement of the ANA during the spring of 2007 meant that a company-sized element could be fielded by the Afghans in Tarin Kowt. The Afghan soldiers were green, having received only some basic training in Kabul, and some additional training in Kandahar by the predecessors of OMLT-III.⁶⁹ In 2007, the ANA still relied on its Russian-styled weaponry, including the venerable AK-47 rifle, but also PKM machine gun variants and RPG-7 rocket launchers. Mobility was provided by Ford Ranger 4x4s, provided by the U.S. The Rangers sometimes had a .50 DshK heavy machine gun fitted, although these weapons were old and jammed frequently.

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66 Interview Army officer C, 02/04/2020, Marine Corps Officer L, 10/06/2020, notes taken during a meeting on this topic with the G3 of 11AMB 15/02/2007, retrieved from the personal archive of Army officer C.

67 The first three OMLTs were small teams, and were often not the main focus of TFU and Battlegroup staffs. Little guidance was given to the commanding officers, and, as a result, each of the commanding officers designed his own six-month plan on how to deploy the OMLT and ANA. This led to a strong deviation regarding the execution of the OMLTs.

68 Interview Army officer C, 22/04/2020.

69 Interview Army officer M, 12/4/2021.

Overall, the level of soldiering was low. The ANA soldiers proved to be insufficient marksmen, as man-sized targets were frequently missed on the range from distances as close as 15 meters.⁷⁰ Many ANA soldiers lacked basic equipment, such as boots, and many chose not to wear combat gear such as helmets and protective vests, adhering to the common ‘inshallah’ attitude often found amongst ANA soldiers. Importantly, the ANA did not possess a strong NCO-cadre, and leadership often fell on the junior officers in the company, who singlehandedly had to order every soldier to their tasks.⁷¹ The junior officers had little knowledge of military decision making processes, and were in this stage of the Afghan Army development often quite happy to follow the instructions of their OMLT mentors.⁷² The combination of poor junior leadership and bad soldiering often led to dangerous situations, such as negligent discharges, and uncoordinated rushes towards an enemy contact, making basic infantry tactics such as combining fire and manoeuvre mostly impossible.

The ANA/OMLT also did not get off to a good start with the TFU-2 rotation, as their first joint operation failed. On February 12 2007, Operation Koch was launched against a suspected IED facilitator in Sad Mardeh, in the Mirabad Valley. When entering the designated quala, the ANA soldiers were fired upon, killing one and wounding another Afghan soldier. A disorganised fire fight followed, giving the enemy fighters the opportunity to make their escape. This incident led to scathing remarks by the SOF on-scene commander as well as Colonel Van Griensven, with the SOF officer stating that he would not be working with the ANA anymore considering the bad level of soldiering.⁷³

Still, the ANA troops proved to be durable soldiers, often quite willing to go out and patrol, and often had an easy way with the local population. Moreover, the ANA had a nose for the extraordinary, often being the first to observe unusual behaviour amongst the locals, and they were able to distinguish between the local Uruzganis and people who did not belong there.⁷⁴ The ANA also proved to be very quick on their feet, often deploying faster than Dutch soldiers in the time needed to move out. This was not only due to their eagerness to go out, but also because of their ‘travel light principle’ and inshallah attitude.

By spring 2007, most elements of TFU-1 had already been rotated to TFU-2, with the BG and PRT already in their third iteration. Although nearly all BG elements had experienced some minor skirmishes before the Battle of Chora, no fighting had been done on any large scale. Increased pressure by the ACM, however, would lead the Dutch forces to become stretched, which resulted in the escalation of force by means of deploying long-range artillery and air support assets. The next section details the chronology of the Battle, which aims to provide the most comprehensive and nuanced reconstruction of the (second) Battle of Chora to date.

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70 Interview Army NCO E, 12/05/2020; Army NCO F, 28/05/20; Army Officer G 30/05/2020.

71 Bossmann, S. (2008). “Operational Mentoring and Liaison Team (OMLT) Samenwerken met het Afgaanse Leger.” *Infanterie* 2008-06, pp. 6-10.

72 Interview Army officer C, 02/04/2020; Army officer G, 30/05/2020.

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

74 Interview Army Officer N, 20/04/2020.

Chapter 5 Prelude to the Battle of Chora

Just prior to the arrival of BG-1, the Australian special forces had conducted Operation Bells, which aimed to open up a corridor to the Gizab District in the north, and Khas Uruzgan in the north-eastern part of Uruzgan. As the Australian SF left soon after Operation Bells, the commanding officer of TFU-1, Colonel Vleugels, faced a conundrum. Operation Bells was not integrated into the Dutch scheme of operations, according to its 'Masterplan'. However, the Chora area was cleared, and no Australian assets were left behind in Chora to 'hold and build' to follow up on these efforts. The Dutch TFU-1 and -2 were therefore to an extent forced to put some effort into the security situation in Chora. During the tenure of BG-1, the majority of the patrols in the Chora area were conducted by the Dutch Special Forces Task Group 'Viper'. BG-1 had to detach a company to support allied RC/S combat operations in Kandahar, and subsequently had not enough combat assets to patrol beyond the ADZs in Tarin Kowt and Deh Rawood. TF Viper thus retained its role as a reconnaissance and enemy interdiction asset at the outer perimeter of the ISAF area of influence, and provided a semi-permanent presence in Chora.⁷⁵ The BG joined in into these regular patrols in the Chora District after it was back to full strength, improving the situational awareness of the TFU in the district. Importantly, by no means were these efforts meant to establish a permanent foothold in the Chora District area, hence the irregular intervals in which the Dutch patrolled Chora district.

During BG-3's pre-deployment reconnaissance to Uruzgan, it was considered that Tarin Kowt and its immediate surroundings would have the most potential for violent encounters with ACM.⁷⁶ As such, Hamers' light infantry company assumed that it would only conduct bi-weekly patrols to Chora in order to allow the PRT to follow up on the earlier clearing operations, and to put in a 'build' effort.⁷⁷ Without permanent presence, the ACM were able to infiltrate back into the district after the earlier clearing operations. From February 2007, and increasingly from April 2007 onwards, ACM pressure was rising in the Chora district.⁷⁸

Human intelligence indicated that the ACM had the intention to strike at the Chora area, which was corroborated by reports from the Afghan National Security Forces and the National Directorate of Security. During April 2007, multiple incidents of enemy contact occurred, culminating with the ACM taking the ANP checkpoint at the Kala Kala position in the Baluchi Valley on April 26. CS 1.1, on its first patrol in Uruzgan, was tasked to the Chora district.⁷⁹ As CS 1.1 took positions on the high ground, the platoon leader was approached by the ANP commander of Kala Kala, explaining the situation to the Dutch Lieutenant. After a quick briefing, the Dutch platoon supported six ANP officers in their attempt to retake the post. Unfortunately, the attempt was unsuccessful. Two Afghan policemen were shot and killed during their assault, and CS 1.1 had to abandon further attempts to retake Kala Kala that day. Unwilling to concede to the ACM, Captain Hamers

75 Cate, ten and Vorm, van der. *Callsign Nassau*. p. 219.

76 Email correspondence with Larry Hamers, 07/05/2021.

77 Ibid.

78 Interview Martijn Kitzen with Army Officer Z; Kitzen et al., "Soft Power, the Hard Way", p. 180.

79 Personal diary Army officer H.

reinforced CS 1.1 with a second platoon, and coordinated a second attempt to retake the police post at Kala Kala on April 29. The incident sparked the increased presence of the BG in the Chora district. From April 29 onwards, the BG's presence in Chora would thus be consolidated, with two platoons now stationed at the White Compound at Ali Shirzai, together with a company staff element. Until this moment, one of the platoons of the BG, together with a PRT mission team, visited Ali Shirzai every two weeks in order to conduct patrols for some days. The now permanent presence at the district centre in Chora meant that either Hamers or his second in command was present, giving orders from inside an armoured vehicle that served as command post, to one of his platoons that was constantly patrolling the Chora area. The second platoon in Chora was responsible for the security of the White Compound and conducted patrols on the streets of Ali Shirzai, whilst the third platoon was assigned to administrative duties or QRF duty at Kamp Holland in Tarin Kowt.⁸⁰

Despite the reinforced presence in Chora, the ACM was not relenting. During May 2007, ACM forces -including medium-level leadership- were reported to have an increased presence in the Chora area, and as a result the ANP at the check points in Kala Kala and Nyazi were frequently harassed with small arms fire and mortars. Moreover, coalition patrols in the area were also repeatedly engaged with small arms fire and RPGs. In order to gain situational awareness about the ACM presence and their command and control nodes in the adjacent Baluchi Pass and northern Dehrashan Valley, a three-day operation called 'Hunter Fox' was executed from May 22 to May 24 under BG command. Importantly, Lieutenant-Colonel Querido intended to force the ACM to act on the large operation, as he wanted to confirm early reporting of a large ACM build-up in the Dehrashan area.⁸¹ The operation fielded two infantry companies: B-Coy and the reserve company of Regional Command South, at that time a company of the UK Royal Welsh Fusiliers, was made available for this operation.⁸² B-Coy was led by Captain Goossens, commanding CSs 2.4 and 2.6, as well as the ISTAR reconnaissance platoon, CS 6.9. Originally an officer in the tank corps, Goossens was hand-picked to command B-Coy as the previous company commander resigned his command just prior to the deployment. During this operation, coalition sub-units were engaged multiple times, but were able to repel the attacks by targeting indirect fire support and air support towards positively identified enemy positions.⁸³ The large build-up of ACM forces could however not be confirmed during this operation.⁸⁴

On May 24, the commanding officer of Regional Command South, British Major General Jonathan 'Jacko' Page, visited the Chora district. Page had recently taken over command of RC/S from Dutch Major-General Ton van Loon, and was acquainting himself with the forces and the area under his command. Page was accompanied by both Van Griensven and Querido during the visit, and the visitors were briefed by Hamers on the tactical situation in Chora district. Hamers made a plea for an increased ANSF presence to relieve some of the pressure on his troops. Acknowledging the

80 Kitzen. *The Course of Co-option*, p. 238; Bommel, N. van (2009). *Task Force Uruzgan: Waargebeurde verhalen van onze soldaten [Task Force Uruzgan: Real Life Stories from our Soldiers]*. JM Meulenhoff bv, p. 60.

81 Interview Brigadier General Querido, 10/05/2021; Powerpoint 'FRAGO 01 Hunter Fox, Revision 1 to Phase 2' (unclass); personal archive R. Goossens.

82 Powerpoint 'FRAGO 01 Hunter Fox, Revision 1 to Phase 2' (unclass); personal archive R. Goossens.

83 'AAR 15-21 June, B-coy 42 BLJ', (unclass), personal archive R. Goossens.

84 Interview Brigadier General Querido, 10/05/2021.

pressing need for more boots on the ground, Page agreed to send more ANA forces to Uruzgan, to the relief of Hamers.⁸⁵

On June 6, A-Coy would be reinforced with around 30 ANA soldiers, who were mentored by three members of the Tarin Kowt-based Dutch Army OMLT. “Their arrival took a little too long. If you need the assistance of the local population and want to know what is going on, you do need an element of the Afghan government that has earned the trust of the population,” Hamers would later respond to the reinforcement of the extra Afghan and Dutch troops.⁸⁶ Still, Hamers was delighted to see the reinforcements arrive at the Chora District Centre.⁸⁷ The ANA and the OMLT made camp in a walled terrain close to the White Compound, aptly dubbed the ‘Brown Compound’, due to the colour of the walls and the terrain.

Meanwhile, reports kept coming in detailing increasing ACM presence. The day before the arrival of the ANA platoon in Chora, CS 0.5, commanded by First Lieutenant Nick Lenssen, was engaged near the village of Nowri, 35 kilometres to the north-east of Ali Shirzai whilst executing a mission to ascertain any ACM presence in this area. As CS 0.5 approached Nowri, ACM opened up with small arms fire and RPGs. From 1000 to 1200 hours local time, CS 0.5 exchanged fire with ACM, eventually calling in air support to deliver two 500-pound guided bombs and two strafing runs against the ACM positioned in and near the village. As no Joint Terminal Attack Controller (JTAC)⁸⁸ was part of the CS, a non-qualified junior NCO stepped up to control the coalition air assets overhead. The ACM, assessed to be around 100-strong based on observations by the fixed-wing air assets, managed to score several hits on the CS’s vehicles, albeit without causing serious damage. As CS 0.5 lacked any dismounted capacity, it had no opportunity to dislodge the ACM from its positions in Nowri, and the platoon remained mostly in position on the high grounds, using mounted weapon systems and light mortars to engage ACM targets from distances ranging from 100 to 800 meters. Importantly, whilst listening in on ACM communications, foreign languages were discerned, corroborating other reports of foreign fighters being present in Uruzgan province.⁸⁹ Foreign fighters were considered a potent threat to the force, as combatants with years of fighting experience in places such as Chechnya and Bosnia would significantly boost ACM capabilities. Indeed, during the firefights, several of CS 0.5’s vehicles were hit by single shot fire, indicating better ACM marksmanship skills compared to other contacts. Moreover, the ACM’s internal radio communications revealed a long string of reports on the location and manoeuvres of CS 0.5, again confirming the use of ‘spotters’⁹⁰ to build the ACM’s situational awareness prior and during engagements. After Lenssen decided to disengage, CS 0.5 was again fired upon during its movement towards Ali Shirzai from positions higher in the mountains flanking the road to

85 Although Hamers has had a request for more ANSF troops, he was hardly the first to state the urgency for more Afghan troops, with TFU and OMLT staff also having made similar appeals. This occasional paper is unable to ascertain what impact Hamers’ request has had on the decision to dispatch more ANA troops to Chora.

86 Bommel, van. *Task Force Uruzgan*, p. 62.

87 Email correspondence with L. Hamers, 07/05/2021.

88 A JTAC is an officer specially trained to designate targets for air assets, and to authorise the delivery of ordnance.

89 Personal archive Army Officer T, Powerpoint presentation ‘NOWRI’, 03/10/2007.

90 During the Afghanistan War, the ACM-aligned locals who reported on coalition movements via a handheld radio were referred to as ‘spotters’. As spotters used non-secure radios to communicate with other ACM, they commonly provided useful information on their own whereabouts and the disposition and intent of the ACM. When the radio communications would constitute a ‘hostile intend’ or a ‘hostile act’, spotters might be engaged by ISAF forces.

Chora. With CS 0.5 returning fire, the contact subsided as Dutch Apache attack helicopters arrived at the scene. A subsequent review of aerial footage made by Dutch fighters during the incident confirmed the build-up of enemy fighters as well as the effectiveness of the bombs dropped.⁹¹ The losses to ACM forces were estimated between 25-40 killed in action during the day.

In the beginning of June, pick-up trucks with armed fighters moving towards the west side of the Chora district were repeatedly observed by A-Coy callsigns. These suspected ACM disappeared in the adjacent green zone of the Baluchi Valley. In the meantime, ACM leaders from other parts of Afghanistan and foreign fighters were again reported to be present in Chora.⁹² Subsequently, Hamers decided to concentrate his forces in and around Ali Shirzai, thereby yielding some terrain to the ACM, but gaining a stronger hold on the key terrain of the District Centre itself. At the White Compound, equipment was packed and loaded on the remaining vehicles, in case of a possible upcoming evacuation.⁹³ On June 11, Hamers reported that government officials had left the area, as well as a number of tribal elders. Moreover, intel suggested that as much as 1,000 ACM fighters were present in the area.⁹⁴ These numbers, if accurate, would put the White Compound in a real danger of being overrun. For Hamers, the reports corroborated A-Coy's observations that fighters were massing in the Chora District Centre area, and as a result, Hamers changed his modus operandus to a more defensive posture.⁹⁵

In neighbouring Helmand Province, large scale attacks on small UK bases had been a frequent occurrence over the past year. UK Forces were able to repel all direct attacks, but in doing so had to resort to large amounts of artillery fire and air support, sustaining a number of casualties in the fighting.⁹⁶ As for Chora, an entry in the diary of one of the Lieutenants involved in these incidents sketches an intriguing picture on the events and mind-set during these days:

"We left to support the checkpoint at Nyazi against an ACM attack. When we arrived it seemed quiet, so we went firm on an overwatch location. As soon as we were static, we were engaged by mortar fire. The first hit about 200 meters in front, the second about 100 meters to our backs. I decided to move the vehicles to present a more difficult target. It was quite nerve-wrecking, as you don't know where the mortar will hit, after it has been fired. The soft skinned vehicles especially are vulnerable, so I decided to move them further away. We could not leave, as we had to support the checkpoint. At some point, we received ICOM-chat, stating that we were in the IED-laced area. We carefully moved out of it, using the same tracks we used before. While we were scanning the area to identify the points of origins, the ACM kept lobbing mortar rounds towards our position. This lasted most of the day. One of the rounds impacted at 10 meters of one of the vehicles, without causing injuries. A small miracle if you think about it. We returned to the White Compound for a couple of hours, and then we drove back to Nyazi again.⁹⁷ We stayed there

91 Interview Army NCO U, 31/05/2021.

92 Bommel, van. *Task Force Uruzgan*, p. 61, 73.

93 *Ibid.* p. 62.

94 Parliamentary Papers II, 2007-08, 27925, 272.

95 Email correspondence L. Hamers, 07/05/2021.

96 Bishop, P. (2007). *3 Para: Afghanistan, Summer 2006: This is War*, HarperCollins; Tootal, S. (2009). *Danger Close: The True Story of Helmand from the Leader of 3 Para*, Hachette UK; Farrell, T. (2017). *Unwinnable: Britain's war in Afghanistan, 2001-2014*, Random House.

97 In fact, CS 1.1 was ordered by Hamers to assist the Niaz checkpoint after the Chief of Police urgently requested Dutch assistance. Source: email correspondence with L. Hamers, 07/05/2021.

*until after dark. All of a sudden we were engaged by the ACM, at a distance of about 400 meters. We let loose with everything we had, quickly establishing dominance. After the fire died down, we returned to the White Compound. We did engage a spotter on Cemetery Hill with 81mm mortars, but arrived at the White Compound without further incident. A few hours sleep, and then a new patrol, to Qual-e-ye-Ragh, south of the river. The next day we were supposed to go the east, to the Sarab area. However, we were called back by the Captain, as he needed all his combat power near the White Compound. Apparently a large attack is imminent on Chora, intel expects around 1,000 enemy fighters. That is a lot.*⁹⁸

The Lieutenant's account is hinting at the change in tactics the Dutch forces -parallel to many other armies involved in the ISAF campaign in Afghanistan- adapted to. A comprehension of these adaptations is very relevant to interpret the accounts of the fighting. During the Afghanistan campaign, Dutch combat units adapted their tactics and force structure to the Uruzgani environment. Firstly, the Dutch platoons –typically 4 YPR Armoured Personnel Carriers (APCs) / 38 soldiers in the case of the mechanised infantry, or 27 soldiers on foot in the case of the light infantry- were augmented heavily during the Afghanistan tours. Combat engineer squads, EOD personnel, a combat ambulance, a mortar squad, a JTAC/artillery observer and PRT personnel were frequently attached to a platoon. Thus beefed up, the platoons became known as a 'smallest unit of action' (SUA) or 'combined arms team (CAT).⁹⁹ With these attachments, each platoon leader would have the combat support and combat service support to his disposal if needed. However, the SUA/CAT would be quite cumbersome as it would frequently consist of over a dozen vehicles. Moreover, a large minority being non-infantry, and as such less trained in infantry combat skills.¹⁰⁰

An important adaptation can be observed when analysing the reaction of Dutch forces when receiving enemy fire. As rehearsed to exhaustion during peacetime exercises, sub-units are to respond aggressively to enemy fire, using direct fire to suppress the enemy forces, after which the unit could choose to close in and kill the enemy using the combination of fire and manoeuvre. Alternatively, when the enemy is of such size or strength that it is unlikely that an assault would yield success, the unit is to suppress the enemy with direct fire, and disengage from the fight. Whilst and after disengaging from the enemy, indirect fire support might be used to attrite the enemy.

In Afghanistan, infantry units subordinated to the BG adapted to Uruzgan by using the high ground to their advantage. It became common for Dutch platoons engaged by enemy forces to withdraw to the mountain sides adjacent to the green zone, and return fire to the points of origin of enemy fire with cannon and heavy machine gun fire. In doing this, the Dutch exploited the superior range of their weapon systems. In response, the ACM used mortars, 107mm rockets and RPGs to engage the static ISAF vehicles on their overwatch positions from the lower lying green zones, using the vegetation and qualas as cover. Without the use of manoeuvre to close in and kill the enemy, this frequently led to a status quo that might last for hours. Usually, the arrival of air

98 Personal diary Army officer H, written 14/06/2007.

99 Groen, J. (2012). *Task Force Uruzgan (2006-2010). Getuigenissen van een missie*, Elijzen, pp. 506-507.

100 Of course, combat support and combat service support units are well trained for their respective tasks in combat, but in this case, the paper refers to infantry-type combat skills.

assets ended the standoff, with the ACM blending back into the environment, depriving coalition forces from the positive identification needed for an engagement.

This stand-off style of fighting had two consequences. Firstly, identifying and effectively engaging the ACM was difficult due to the distance and the terrain, frequently resulting in high levels of ammunition expenditure as the points of origin of enemy fire were saturated with direct fire. Secondly, without decisive action, fire fights were often inconclusive, as ACM were usually able to disengage and fight another day. The same would go for the coalition forces, as armoured vehicles and bad marksmanship from ACM troops usually prevented coalition casualties. A telling statistic is that during the Dutch' four year involvement in Uruzgan, only two Dutch soldiers were killed in action by direct enemy fire, with the vast majority being killed by IEDs.

Although media reporting during the Uruzgan campaign frequently mentioned 'heavy fighting', it is worth noticing that this pertained in most cases to a rather static exchange of fire, without any observable need from either side to press the issue.¹⁰¹

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101 The perceived lack of aggressiveness has been criticised: an Australian officer commented that he "admired the courage of Dutch Special Forces, but less to its conventional forces for failing to aggressively patrol." Source: Masters, C. (2017). *No Front Line: Australian special forces at war in Afghanistan*. Allen & Unwin, p. 154; Wiggen, O. van, "Reactie op: Ik wijk voor niets, want ik ben infanterist", *Infanterie*, 2013/12, p. 4.

Chapter 6 Chain of events

On June 13, B-Coy prepared for a planned cordon and search operation together with an ANA platoon and a three-man OMLT at Kamp Holland.¹⁰² This would be the first cordon and search operation of OMLT-III and the ANA. Two platoons of B-coy cordoned a large quala complex in the town of Seyeddin, on the Westbank of the Dehrashan. The aim of the operation was the apprehension of an IED-facilitator, who, according to intelligence reports, was located there. The ANA platoon's task was to break into the quala as soon as the cordon was established, with the OMLT in the mentoring role. As soon as the quala was cleared, the Dutch engineers would perform a detailed search, looking for weapons or items of interest to the intelligence community. On June 14, the company-sized element moved to a location in the desert where the night was spent. At dawn the next day, the quala was cordoned off and searched, albeit without much results.¹⁰³

Although the operation was somewhat of a dud, and no shots were fired in anger, the cordon and search operation provided the OMLT with several insights regarding the ANA capabilities. During the preparation phase, the OMLT had spent several days working with the ANA troops on how to operate in the close quarters of a quala.¹⁰⁴ Using tape drills and mock-ups, entry drills were rehearsed to exhaustion. Room clearing and other basic urban operation skills were also practised. Confident that the ANA would be able to deliver, the OMLT started with the operation. However, the entry into the compound was a chaos. In a reiteration of Operation Koch in February 2007, the Afghan soldiers abandoned all drills, and had to be put into position physically by the OMLT.¹⁰⁵ Reflecting on the operation in Seyeddin, it was clear that the ANA lacked the conceptual ability to convert the training scenario to a real life entry. For them, the situation appeared as novel, despite the hours of training in the days before. Fortunately, no shots were fired, but it functioned as a reminder to the OMLT on the deficiencies of the nascent Afghan army.

On its way back to Tarin Kowt on the morning of June 15, the B-Coy combat group, positioned on the high ground overlooking Tarin Kowt, witnessed a suicide bomb-attack on CS 2.5, another B-Coy platoon. This platoon was also on its way back to Kamp Holland, after securing a women's shura (June 15 was Women's Day). The attack in the centre of Tarin Kowt would claim the lives of several Afghan citizens, as well as Dutch Private First Class Timo Smeehuijzen. Also, many Afghans were injured in the blast, as well as three Dutch soldiers. Shortly after, B-Coy's position on the high ground was fired upon using a single 107mm rocket, which impacted between the vehicles without causing damage. With CS 2.5 having sustained casualties in Tarin Kowt, and only

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102 B-coy consisted of two infantry platoons, the other two platoons were assigned to Poentjak (CS) and to QRF duties in Kamp Holland (CS).

103 AAR 15-21 June, B-coy 42 BLJ, (unclass), personal archive R. Goossens.

104 Interview Army officer C, 22/04/2020; Army NCO D, 11/06/2020.

105 Ibid.

part of a QRF present in Kamp Holland - CS 2.5 was the platoon assigned to the QRF task as well¹⁰⁶-, Captain Goossens ordered CS 2.6, which was at his location, back to Tarin Kowt, and CS 2.4 to take positions in the desert east of the Dehrashan area. This allowed CS 2.4 to either reinforce A-Coy in Chora on short notice, or to reinforce Kamp Holland if so needed. Indeed, Captain Hamers requested CS 2.4 to be moved closer to Ali Shirzai, in order to keep his lines of communication open.¹⁰⁷ Eventually, CS 2.4 would take position in the Saddle, a desert feature several kilometres south from the White Compound. From this position, CS 2.4 would dominate the route in and out of Chora, preventing A-Coy to be cut off by ACM. Meanwhile, Goossens, with the rest of his company consisting of CS 2.6 and the ANA/OMLT, returned to Kamp Holland, where they arrived at around 1400 hours.¹⁰⁸

The TFU intelligence section (G2) was by this time aware that the ACM intended to strike in Uruzgan, most likely in the Chora area. The TFU G2 based its assessment on multiple sources, including reporting from the sub-units on the ground, intercepted enemy radio communications, human sources and Unmanned Aerial Vehicle (UAV) footage. The intelligence section combined this data, and subsequently would deliver an assessment to the commander to work on. Several intelligence sections however, came up with different numbers. The NDS, the Afghan intelligence agency, reported between 150 and 250 enemy combatants in the Chora area, which was reported to the TFU staff by the CIMIC section of the TFU on June 15. This number of enemy fighters corresponded with the assessment made by the ANA intelligence section, which was communicated through the OMLT.¹⁰⁹ Other estimates put the number of enemy combatants higher, between 300 and 1,000.¹¹⁰ Considering the large deviation in ACM numbers, it proved unfeasible for the G2 to make an accurate assessment at this time.

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106 One section of the QRF, CS 2.5R was conducting the Women's Day Shura Patrol, whilst the other section was busy maintaining its vehicles. After the contact was reported, CS 2.5E had to work frantically to gear up and get the YPRs in a combat-ready condition. Although an Australian platoon was supposed to back up the stricken section, CS 2.5E was out of the wire earlier, taking the unarmoured Role II ambulances with them in a highly aggressive road move to the Tarin Kowt town centre, destroying the base's gates as CS 2.5E could not find the patience to wait for the guard to open the gates with the keys. Source: interview Army NCO O, 23/04/2021.

107 AAR 15-21 June, B-coy 42 BLJ, (unclass), personal archive R. Goossens.

108 Interview Army officer A, 23/06/2020.

109 Interview Army officer C, 22/04/2020.

110 These numbers are based on research performed by Richard van Gils and Rogier Koedijk, NIMH.



The White Compound in April 2007, with several Dutch APCs parked in front.
© Sjoerd Hilckmann



Dutch PzH2000 firing in support of Dutch troops in the morning of June 16, 2007.
© Gerben van Es



ANP Checkpoint Nyazi
© Personal archive Larry Hamers



ANP Checkpoint overlooking the green zone.
© Gerben van Es



Captain Larry Hamers briefs the commanding officer of CS 1.1 on his plans for the defence of the Chora District, with A-Coy's JTAC in attendance.
© Personal archive Larry Hamers



The regimental colours of 13 RSPB and the Afghan flag flying on top of the White Compound during the Battle of Chora.
© Sjoerd Hilckmann



Overlooking the Baluchi Valley from the defensive position on the White Compound, looking towards the West.
© Personal archive Larry Hamers



The ANA and OMLT pass the White Compound on their way to the line of departure on the morning of June 19, 2007.
© Personal archive Larry Hamers



Dutch troops perform Battle Damage Assessment (BDA) patrols with the ANA and a local militia in the Chora district.
© Gerben van Es

June 16

In the early morning of June 16, ACM again attacked the ANP checkpoints at Sarab, Kala Kala and Nyazi in the Baluchi Valley. The checkpoint at Nyazi was reported to be surrounded by ACM, which could be confirmed, but the situation at the other two checkpoints remained unclear for some time. From the White Compound, explosions were witnessed in the Sarab Valley towards the east, where ANP checkpoint Sarab was located. In the afternoon, this checkpoint, commanded by an ANP officer called Toor Abdullah, would be overrun by the ACM, resulting in the death of several police officers.¹¹¹ Toor Abdullah himself was able to flee his checkpoint before the ACM took over, and would later align himself with Rozi Khan. CSs 1.2 and 1.3, located at the White Compound, were ordered by Hamers to assist the ANP as soon the reports came in.¹¹²

At this time, a ‘Troops in Contact’, or TIC, had already been declared. Declaring a TIC allowed coalition forces to draw air assets from ISAF, although the decision to actually deploy air assets kinetically¹¹³ had to be made by the commander of the TFU. Also the decision to use the PzH2000 had to be made at the TFU level. Before Van Griensven made these decisions, he would be advised by a team of staff officers including the TFU Operations Officer, the Legal Advisor and the Chief of Joint Fires.¹¹⁴ Usually, a TIC was opened at the start of the hostilities and ended as soon as the fight was concluded. However, as the a-coy was exchanging fire with ACM the majority of the day, this TIC would not be closed until June 17.

CS 1.3 was tasked to the west, and was overlooking the green zone in support of the Nyazi checkpoint. Whilst at this position, the platoon was engaged by mortar fire. As CS 1.3 repositioned its vehicles, a negligent rifle discharge by one of the Dutch troops inside a Patria vehicle hit the hand grenade storage box in the vehicle, causing a fire inside the Patria.¹¹⁵ Although the fire was quickly under control, the Patria had to be towed back to the White Compound for repairs. a-coy was by now committing all its platoons to the fight, however the ANP checkpoints were nevertheless falling to ACM forces.

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111 Velde, P. ter (2008). *Kabul & Kamp Holland: over de stad en de oorlog*, Conserve, p. 159; Bommel, van. *Task Force Uruzgan*, p. 65.

112 Email correspondence L. Hamers, 07/05/2021.

113 ‘kinetic’ is Army slang for the actual use of weaponry.

114 Interview Army Officer S, 03/06/2021.

115 Interview Army officer P, 05/05/2021.

In this occasional paper, the checkpoints occupied by the ANP are frequently mentioned. A closer description of these checkpoints is needed, as the Afghan and coalition perceptions of a police post are very divergent.¹¹⁶ In Chora district, the ANP checkpoints consisted of a wall about one meter high, made from stones or sandbags, with the Afghan flag often in top on a tree branch. Occupying the checkpoint would be a number of rather shabby Afghan males, frequently out of uniform, armed with an AK-47 rifle. Often, drugs would be present, as well as a young boy, known as a 'chai boy' to coalition forces.¹¹⁷ The resident ANP would often charge locals for passage, and were generally considered corrupt and prone to crime. The ANP would formally report to the Chief of Police, however the ANP were also involved in tribal issues and by no means fully supportive to ISAF or the Afghan government.

Back in Kamp Holland, Van Griensven and Querido were looking for ways to relieve the pressure on A-Coy. Having been struck by the suicide attack the previous day, Querido intended to give CS 2.5 a three day-rest before deploying them again and assigned the platoon to guard duties at Kamp Holland. So, as CS 2.4 took position at the Saddle and CS 2.7 was holding Patrol Base Poentjak, the only BG-elements uncommitted were a single infantry platoon (CS 2.6), the reconnaissance platoons from the BG (CS 0.5) and ISTAR (CS 6.9), and TF Viper. Viper was under TFU-command, and Van Griensven decided to commit them to the fight. He ordered the SOF platoon to the Baluchi Pass, between the Dehrashan Valley and the Baluchi Valley, with elements under B-Coy command moving up to the eastern flank of the Dehrashan to support the SOF operators. Their objective was to draw out and fix as many ACM as possible, interdicting the build-up of ACM around The Chora District Centre. B-Coy (consisting of CSs 2.6 and 6.9) was ordered by Querido to take up a position referred to as 'Crow 1', in order to draw attention of the ACM, thus distracting them from the build-up in the Baluchi Valley.¹¹⁸ Viper would take up position on the opposite bank of the river, on the west side. Both B-Coy and Viper would start their infiltration towards the south of the Baluchi Valley later that night.¹¹⁹ CS 0.5, having returned to Kamp Holland the previous evening, had to forego higher echelon maintenance to its vehicles and again formed up in order to move out on short notice.

At this time, Querido assessed the total number of enemy fighters at around 200, and was not yet sure that the events unfolding were part of the large scale attack on the Chora district.¹²⁰ During the late afternoon, ACM again engaged the BG platoons in Chora with mortars. Three

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116 Griensven, van. "It's all about the Afghan people", p. 7.

117 'Chai boys' are young Afghan boys, kept by adult Afghan men as (sex) slaves. This practice is locally known as bacha bazi. These young boys, wearing make-up and with a rather effeminate appearance, were frequently present around local power brokers such as ANP leadership.

118 AAR 15-21 June, B-coy 42 BLJ, (unclass), Personal archive R. Goossens; Berg, R. van den, "Een Breed Scala van Special Operations", *Infanterie*, 2008-03 pp. 5-8.

119 Berg, van den. "Een Breed Scala van Special Operations", p. 5.

120 Interview Brigadier General Querido, 12/01/2021.

CSs, 2.4, 1.2 and 1.3, by now reported incoming indirect fire on their positions.¹²¹ The BG forces responded with mortar fire and air support, both from fixed wing aircraft and Dutch Apache attack helicopters. The OMLT and ANA set up vehicle checkpoints in Ali Shirzai, in order to keep the town in the hands of the coalition troops. The Afghan soldiers conducted patrols in Ali Shirzai and searched every vehicle that wanted to pass their checkpoints.¹²² During the afternoon, the skirmishes at the police check points also continued, eventually subsiding in intensity at around 1830 hours. Hamers, at the White Compound, was concerned with the increasing pressure on his positions. Indeed, somewhere in the afternoon, the White Compound itself was fired upon by ACM, to which the soldiers manning the guard towers responded with machine gun fire.¹²³ The White and Brown Compounds were consequently reinforced with claymore mines¹²⁴ and barbed wire. Preparations were being made to accommodate all CSs with a position in a 360-degree defensive perimeter, if ACM were to push further into Ali Shirzai.¹²⁵

A Dutchbat III veteran, Captain Hamers was highly reluctant to yield any ground to a militant force, but he was also unsure whether or not the TFU, and in extension the Dutch government, had the stomach to weather the storm. Hamers recalled: "There were two options to choose from in cases like this; either to stay or to extract. An extraction could be performed if there were no local authorities left and a way out was open. In our case a viable option. I was questioned if it would be feasible to stay. I confirmed that staying was an option although we were pretty tired. I advised to consider what Chora was worth to us."¹²⁶ Hamers' question "What is Chora worth to us?"¹²⁷ provided Van Griensven and Querido with a crucial decision. Stay, and risk sustaining high casualties defending the town, or leave, and yield ground to an enemy militia. Receiving the question from Hamers via Querido around 1930 hours, Van Griensven ordered a meeting with his Chief of Staff, the TFU operations officer (G3), Querido and the BG operations officer (S3), and the legal advisor. In this meeting, Colonel Van Griensven and his senior officers weighed their options.¹²⁸

Querido, now convinced that his force was under a far more serious threat than his initial assessment of 200 enemy fighters, was the main proponent of leaving the Chora area. The most pressing factor of concern for the BG commander was that he felt unsure that he would be allowed to apply the amount of force that he felt was necessary to keep Chora in coalition hands. Secondly, he had his reservations concerning the limited sustainability of BG elements during the operation, because of the scarce options to resupply the fielded units with the highly needed fuel, ammunition, etc.¹²⁹ Lastly, Querido had genuine concerns that his A-Coy would be overrun

121 Kooij, G. (2007). *After Action Review Concerning the Events Around Chora (16-20 June)*. CLAS. Den Haag, NIMH, p. 9.

122 Velde, ter. *Kabul & Kamp Holland*, p. 159.

123 Email correspondence with L. Hamers, 07/05/2021.

124 The Dutch Army uses a variant of the M18A1 Claymore mine, although the euphemism 'Horizontal Effect Weapon' is used to avoid any association with the use of anti-personnel mines, as the Dutch government had ratified the Convention on the Prohibition of the Use, Stockpiling, Production and Transfer of Anti-Personnel Mines and on their Destruction, known informally as the Ottawa Treaty, in 1997.

125 Velde, ter. *Kabul & Kamp Holland*, pp. 159-160.

126 Email correspondence with L. Hamers, 07/05/2021.

127 The exact words Hamers used were "Wat is Chora ons waard?".

128 Kooij. *After Action Review Concerning the Events Around Chora (16-20 June)*, p. 3.

129 Interview Brigadier General Querido, 12/01/2021; Interviews Colonel Querido with JP van der Meer, 20/02/2014, 20/06/2014.

and routed, or at least suffer significant casualties. Within the TFU and BG, the intelligence community was (still) unable to present a narrow estimate of the number of enemy forces in the area, leading to rather wild estimations ranging between 150 and 1,000 enemy fighters.¹³⁰ If true, the White Compound would be hard to defend against those numbers, as the White Compound was not ideally located in case of an attack: the terrain offered plenty of avenues of approach and cover.

Again, the Dutch situation seemed roughly similar to the UK Forces' in Helmand in 2006. In Helmand, the UK BG became stretched as it defended an increasing number of geographically dispersed 'platoon houses' in towns like Musa Qula, Sangin and Kajaki. Unwilling to yield any ground to a numerically superior enemy, the UK Forces fought a series of pitched battles in these built-up areas, and were only able to hold off the ACM by using considerable amounts of ground-based fire support and air assets. This led the British to stray from the Helmand campaign plan, which was supposed to focus only on the lozenge of Camp Bastion -the main British base-, and the towns of Lashkar Gah and Garesh.¹³¹

In a similar vein, the Dutch initially looked to establish themselves in the towns of Tarin Kowt and Deh Rawood, but, likewise to the British, found themselves stretched as Dutch platoons had to secure five locations by the summer of 2007, including Tarin Kowt, Deh Rawood, patrol bases Poentjak and Volendam, and now the Chora District Centre in Ali Shirzai. Besides guarding these locations, it was decided that a QRF had to be on station in Deh Rawood and Tarin Kowt, to reinforce other platoons if necessary. When considering the efforts needed to escort convoys to each location for relief and resupply, very few platoons were left to patrol the area of operations to 'broaden the ink blot'.¹³² In conclusion, Chora indeed seemed one bridge too far if the TFU wanted to reduce the number of platoons fixed to patrol bases and district centres.

Colonel Van Griensven had other arguments to consider. Besides the lives of the Dutch troops, he had to consider the lives of the local Afghans in Chora, as it had been reported that the ACM had executed and mutilated several in the past days.¹³³ Moreover, the ACM would not refrain from exploiting a Dutch withdrawal from Chora in their propaganda. Later, Van Griensven reflected on his decision, and stated that a withdrawal from Chora would also have caused the credibility of the Dutch Army as a fighting force to hit rock bottom, as it would be "disgraced again" (the previous time being Srebrenica 1995) and would have "compromised the entire ISAF-mission".¹³⁴

After a heated argument in his office, Van Griensven decided to hold and defend the Chora district, using all means available to him, including the BG, but also his artillery and available air power. "We will reinforce and defend massively, thereby using all means available. In respect

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130 Voordracht Vaandelopschrift Afghanistan Regiment Limburgse Jagers.

131 Interview Major General Jerry Thomas (ret.) Royal Marines, C-TFH HERRICK 5, 17/09/2020; Directorate Land Warfare, (2015). *Operation HERRICK Campaign Study (declassified version)*, British Ministry of Defence, Warminster, pp. 1-1_2-1-1_3.

132 Sar, van der. "Kick the Enemy Where it Hurts Most." pp. 12-14.

133 'After Action Review van de Gebeurtenissen in Chora van 15 tot 20 juni 2007', C-CONTCO, Kandahar, 23/07/2007p.8.

134 Bommel, van. *Task Force Uruzgan*, p. 75.

to the 'rules of engagement', we will push ourselves to the limits of what is permissible," Van Griensven stated.¹³⁵

Querido strongly considered the tactical deployment of the BG to be his decision, and opposed the option to hold on to Chora, favouring leaving the district, and reiterated the perceived ratio between possible ACM forces and coalition soldiers. Still, Van Griensven's decision would stand, and Querido adhered to the orders of his superior officer. Querido's staff subsequently started preparations to defend Chora.¹³⁶ Querido later stated that he had got used to the TFU practice of leaving all combat operations to the BG, and in this case the TFU was establishing control over the fight.¹³⁷ He recalled that in the past, all operations had been planned and executed by the BG, and that the TFU would later issue a fragmentary order to correct the administration.¹³⁸ Van Griensven's perception, however, was that he was exercising mission command, by allowing Querido to do his work as BG-commander without micro-management from the higher echelon. Normally, these finesses between superior and subordinate commanding officers would be addressed during pre-deployment training, but as both officers originated from different brigades, and had not participated in joint training -the TFU-staff was already in theatre for two months before BG-3 arrived- these differences in appreciation were addressed whilst in Uruzgan.

After Querido left the TFU commander's office, the BG staff started to work on the scheme of manoeuvre for the upcoming days. Querido intended to drive to Chora during the night to get some ground truth on the situation. The chief of staff informed the Dutch Directorate of Operations (DOPS) in The Hague, Van Griensven informed the RC/S staff on his decision and, shortly afterwards, personally contacted the commanding officer of RC/S, Major-General Page, in Kandahar, informing him on his decision, as well as asking his views on using ground-based fire support on targets that were beyond direct observation. According to Van Griensven, Page agreed to the use of unobserved indirect fire in this particular case, as well as the observed use of air power to interdict the ACM around Chora.¹³⁹ Then, Van Griensven called four-star General Dick Berlijn, the Dutch Chief of Defence to inform him on his decision. Berlijn agreed on Van Griensven's decision, and the Colonel asked Berlijn to further inform the Dutch Director-General of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs on the ongoing situation in Chora.¹⁴⁰

In the following hour, through the PRT communication channels, local Chora leadership was asked to inform the civilians about the upcoming bombardment and to strongly advise them to leave the area. The evacuation of the few villages and farmsteads prior to the use of ground based fire support and air support was shortly hereafter confirmed by one of the tribal leaders and

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135 Bommel, van. *Task Force Uruzgan*, p. 75, 'After Action Review van de Gebeurtenissen in Chora van 15 tot 20 juni 2007', C-CONTCO, p. 8.

136 Interview Brigadier General Querido, 12/01/2021; Interviews Colonel Querido with JP van der Meer, 20/02/2014, 20/06/2014; Kitzen. *The Course of Co-option*, p. 404.

137 Ibid.

138 Ibid.

139 Interview Lt-Gen Van Griensven, 06/07/2020.

140 Interview Lt-Gen Van Griensven, 05/05/2021.

reporting from A-Coy. As it would seem during and afterwards the operation, this confirmation was only partly true.¹⁴¹

Meanwhile, Van Griensven and Van der Voet were working unrelentingly to increase the numbers of soldiers that could be committed to the fight. The Australian Special Forces were not allowed to join due to national restrictions. The reason provided to Van Griensven was that TF-66 was not yet fully operational capable (FOC). Indeed, the Australians had been forthcoming on the fact that the RTF infantry platoons were only allowed to provide security for the Australian engineers, and that TF-66 would not be allowed to conduct combat operations before they were FOC. Any deviation of these agreements would have to be cleared by the Australian Department of Defence in Canberra. Van Griensven believed that the Australian government in Canberra did not have complete situational awareness, and were as such hesitant to let the Australian SF detachment join the upcoming Dutch operation.¹⁴² As it was, Canberra was not convinced on participating in the Chora fighting.¹⁴³ The Australian liaison to the TFU staff had contacted the Australian Special Operations commander, Major General Mike Hindmarsh, and informed him on the intended use of artillery, and he questioned the rationale behind the use of the howitzer.¹⁴⁴ Hindmarsh was seriously at unease with the unobserved use of artillery fire, as it presented a scenario in which civilian casualties were more than likely, and Canberra was unwilling to cross that line, as the Australia's ROEs did not allow that kind of force.¹⁴⁵ Hindmarsh thus took the decision to withhold Australian SF support to the fighting in Chora for the time being.

Van Griensven subsequently asked the RTF to secure the Tarin Kowt area, freeing up Dutch combat assets. During the night, the TFU commander attempted to gain some leverage through diplomatic channels. The Dutch Ambassador to Afghanistan, present in Uruzgan, was contacted to ask his Australian counterpart to lift the restrictions on TF-66, to the annoyance of the Australian diplomats.¹⁴⁶ Although without immediate result, eventually, in the early morning hours of June 17, the government in Canberra authorised TF-66 to participate in combat operations, but TF-66 was not allowed to enter the Chora District Centre area, apparently much to the dismay of the Australian special forces themselves.¹⁴⁷

Van der Voet was pushing RC/S for more Afghan National Security Forces, and PRT staff officers contacted ANP General Qasim, the provincial Chief of Police, to get either Afghan militia or Afghan National Police to again man the checkpoints in Chora. Van der Voet also called local powerbroker Rozi Khan via an interpreter, in an attempt to get him involved. Van der Voet had built up a good rapport with Rozi Khan, as he previously arranged the release of an Afghan male that had been detained by coalition forces. As Van der Voet was informed by Rozi Khan on the

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141 Kooij, *After Action Review Concerning the Events Around Chora*, p. 9.

142 Interview Lt-Gen H. van Griensven, 05/05/2021.

143 Email correspondence (anonymous) 10/05/2021.

144 Masters, *No Front Line*, pp. 153-154.

145 Email correspondence (anonymous) 10/05/2021.

146 The Australian Minister for Defence Brendan Nelson would later comment that he "became uncomfortable with the Dutch political class. The Dutch ambassador relaying instructions on what would and would not be done, is not what we would do". Source: Masters, *No Front Line*, p. 154.

147 Email correspondence with Lt-Gen Van Griensven, 05/05/2021.

status of the detainee, he understood that the TFU's standing with Rozi Khan and -by extension the Barakzai tribe- were of greater importance than prosecuting any potential wrongdoing by the elderly Afghan. As Van der Voet convinced Van Griensven to authorise the release of the old man, he was thanked by Rozi Khan, stating that he was in his debt. Van der Voet used his good standing with Rozi Khan, asking him to reinforce the TFU effort.¹⁴⁸ Rozi Khan subsequently agreed to take about a hundred fighters in support of the Dutch to the White Compound. However, the stated total strength of Rozi Khan's militia would vary over time, leading to uncertainty in the TFU and BG about both the reliability and availability of Rozi Khan's force.¹⁴⁹

It appeared during TFU-2 that the first Battle of Chora in June 2006 was incited by former governor Jan Mohammed Khan. On his request, district chief Haji Obaidullah had made an arrangement with the ACM, in order to show Jan Mohammed Khan's enduring influence in the province, as well as the powerlessness of governor Munib. It was a good possibility that the same scenario would occur in the spring of 2007, with Jan Mohammed Khan once again aiming to project his influence at the expense of governor Munib (and by extension ISAF).¹⁵⁰ By increasing the pressure on the local ISAF and Afghan security forces in Chora, the aim was to convince the TFU that these forces were outnumbered by ACM and therefore needed more troops to cope the uprising. Matiullah Khan, originating from the same Popolzai tribe as Jan Mohammed Khan, would then be proposed as the solution, thus saving the day. However, as a quid pro quo, Matiullah would also have to be appointed as provincial Chief of Police, a position he highly desired.¹⁵¹

In order to prevent the Popolzai overflow of authorities -and thus a new buyout- in the Chora district, a plan was drafted by TFU-2. This blueprint consisted of the permanent presence of two BG platoons in Chora, and the cooperation of local police forces and tribal leaders to make Matiullah's assistance superfluous. In the meantime, Matiullah sent the PRT a message that he was absolutely willing to help the TFU if they needed his help in Uruzgan. President Karzai himself, also a Popolzai, proposed a solution to the shortage of security forces -a request by the TFU to receive more police officers in the province was denied in Kabul- by sliding forward Matiullah Khan as the intended new provincial chief of police as well. This offer was however rejected by the TFU.¹⁵²

In order to have a counterbalance against Jan Mohammed Khan's influence in Uruzgan, the TFU turned to the most dominant Barakzai leader and former provincial Chief of Police, Rozi Khan, to form an alliance. Locally, ties were tightened with the Achekzai

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148 Interview Brigadier General G. Van der Voet, 10/06/2021, Kitzen; *The Course of Co-option*, pp. 408-409.

149 Interview Colonel Querido with JP van der Meer, 20/02/2014.

150 Bijlert, van. "Unruly commanders and violent power struggles", p. 15.

151 Kitzen. *The Course of Co-option*, p. 401.

152 Ibid.

tribe, specifically with their leader Abdul Khaleq, ally of Rozi Khan, and his brother Malem Sadiq. This recently agreed, but still fragile, relationship between the TFU, Barakzai and Achekzai tribes could however not prevent the Chora district from being attacked by the ACM. Nonetheless, Abdul Khaleq informed the Dutch PRT that the local population was considering an evacuation, obviously aware of the intent of the ACM. The Dutch troops were therefore not surprised by the upcoming attack during the following days.¹⁵³

The foreseen issues concerning troop shortages did however materialise, as the TFU could not field enough troops in response to the increasing threat in Chora. It was evident that due to the limited TFU resources, local allies would have to fulfil a -crucial- role in this operation. It was uncertain who from the newly formed allies would participate in the defence of Chora. Soon it became clear that several influential leaders in Chora were unreachable, and most leaders from outside the district were not eager to interfere in affairs that they considered not their own. Van der Voet stated that 'if we call Kabul this problem will be solved within the hour, however, a new provincial Chief of Police [Matiullah Khan] will be appointed.' This unfavourable solution was eventually put aside when Van der Voet succeeded in contacting Rozi Khan for his support. He immediately responded and soon afterwards, Rozi Khan became officially part of the TFU's reinforcement plan for Chora and would head to the district together with the TFU troops.¹⁵⁴

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153 Ibid., pp. 409.

154 Ibid., p. 410.

June 17

To support the defence of Chora, the Dutch PanzerHaubitze 2000 (PzH), a German made 155mm self-propelled howitzer, commenced the engagement of ACM targets west of the Chora District Centre area right after midnight. Over the next two hours, around thirty 155mm grenades were fired on targets in the Baluchi valley, using extended range grenades that were recently acquired by the Dutch Army.¹⁵⁵ The intent of the bombardment was to “disrupt the opposing military forces with harassing fires in order to prevent the Chora District Centre from being overrun”.¹⁵⁶ As no air assets were available in this time frame, the howitzer was Van Griensven’s solution to keep pressure on the ACM.¹⁵⁷ Importantly, the majority of the shells were targeted on locations in the open field near roads and crossroads, and each target was engaged with a single grenade, limiting the effect on qualas and the risk of collateral damage.¹⁵⁸ Additionally, 28 guided bombs were delivered by coalition aircraft that night, controlled by Dutch JTACs in and around the Chora Valley.¹⁵⁹

The use of fire support during this night has proven contentious, and several investigations have been launched to assess its legality, as it was common during the ISAF campaign to observe artillery fire to verify the targets and to adjust the fire when necessary. Ultimately, the public prosecutor in the Netherlands concluded that International Humanitarian Law and the Rules of Engagement had been respected.¹⁶⁰ During the bombardment, it is generally agreed that besides ACM, Afghan civilians were killed as well, despite efforts made by the TFU staff to warn off any civilians through local leaders in the hours preceding the bombardment. It was also assessed that some fifty ACM were killed by the engagements of aircrafts and the PzH2000 that night.¹⁶¹

Since 2007, a heated debate has been waged on the use of the PzH2000 in Uruzgan. As the use of this heavy piece of artillery during the Battle of Chora is contested, this occasional paper does not aim to tap into the legal ramifications of its use, rather to present the context of its presence, its use and the effects when employed.

The PzH2000 was acquired in 2004 and deliveries started in 2004. By 2006, the PzH2000 had replaced all the M109 howitzers in the Dutch army. The PzH2000 fired the same

155 Teuben, K., and Koppe, E., Pleitnota Rechtbank Den Haag, zitting van 29 maart 2021, 9.30 uur Zaaknummer C/09/604819 en C/09/581972. De Staat der Nederlanden / (1) Akhtar Mohamad c.s.; (2) Erven Mohamad. p. 11.

156 Kooij, G. (2007). AAR *Concerning the Events Around Chora (16-20 June)*. CLAS. Den Haag, NIMH. supplement E (unclassified) Joint Fires.

157 Email correspondence with Lt-Gen H. van Griensven, 02/07/2021.

158 Research Sven Maaskant, Richard van Gils en Rogier Koedijk, NIMH.

159 Teuben and Koppe. Pleitnota Rechtbank Den Haag, Zaaknummer C/09/604819 en C/09/581972, p. 15.

160 See AIHRC and UNAMA joint investigation into the civilian deaths caused by the ISAF operation in response to a Taliban attack in Chora district, Uruzgan on 16th June 2007; Openbaar Ministerie: “Geweldsaanwending Chora rechtmatig” (persbericht, 30 June 2008); Human Rights Watch, “Troops in contact. Airstrikes and Civilian Deaths in Afghanistan” (8 September 2008); Afghanistan Independent Human Rights Commission/United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan.

161 Interviews Colonel Querido with JP van der Meer, 20/02/2014; Kooij, G. (2007). AAR *Concerning the Events Around Chora (16-20 June)*. CLAS. Den Haag, NIMH. supplement E (unclassified) Joint Fires, p. 6.

155mm ordnance as its predecessor, albeit from a more modern chassis and with a far more advanced fire control system. The PzH2000 was deployed to Afghanistan in 2006, with two artillery pieces allocated to Deh Rawood and one to Tarin Kowt. The second howitzer in Deh Rawood was not intended for immediate use, but rather to serve as a reserve in case the other broke down, as no repair crew was present in Deh Rawood.

In contemporary media, the presence of the PzH2000 in Uruzgan was regularly criticised, and referred to as a result of a 'use it or lose it' policy. However, the use of heavy artillery by coalition forces was quite common in Afghanistan. In neighbouring Helmand, UK forces not only used field artillery, but also rocket artillery in support of their troops. The PzH2000 was also deployed by the German forces in Kunduz. Moreover, the Dutch did not have an alternative for the PzH2000, as the Dutch army did not have any lighter calibre artillery in its force structure. The only alternative was deploying mortars, but mortars have severe range limitations when compared with the PzH2000.

Artillery has several advantages over other means of fire support. The most important one is that within minutes ground based fire support could be delivered, in any type of weather and at all times. Air support is at times unavailable, especially when multiple contacts occur simultaneously. Also, contrary to artillery, the weather affects the availability of air power. Lastly, artillery is able to support troops for prolonged periods, where air assets have to return to base as ammunition or fuel levels drop. In conclusion, the deployment of the PzH2000 to Afghanistan, undoubtedly to the relief of artillerymen looking for a useful deployment for the new piece, did make military sense and would be recommendable in any military environment where troops might encounter hostile forces, and would be in need of fire support.

Lastly, in light of the ongoing debate on the use of artillery during the Battle of Chora, context is needed in regard to the destructive power of the 155mm ordnance. Several media reported that the Dutch artillery was used to systematically destroy grid square after grid square.¹⁶² In reality, a 155mm grenade only holds about an eighth of the explosive filling of the smallest air dropped ordnance.¹⁶³ Indicative of the exaggeration of the destruction caused by Dutch artillery, is that when targeted by an artillery observer, a single fire of six rounds on a target of 50m x 100m is common, depending on the type of target. Moreover, modern grenades might be set to explode in the air, on the surface or in the ground.¹⁶⁴ Despite its destructive potential, when considering the total amount of 155mm grenades delivered by the Dutch PzH2000, a simple deduction indicates that the aforementioned claims of "destroying entire grid squares" are highly hyperbolic, and not in concordance with the reality of the fight.

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162 A single grid square is 1000m by 1000m in size.

163 A Mk82 Paveway 500lbs bomb holds around 87 kg of explosives, while a 155mm grenade holds a little under 11kg.

164 When a grenade explodes in the air, its damaging effect is caused by shrapnel, with very limited blast effect. A grenade exploding on the surface causes damage by both blast and shrapnel. When a fuse is set to 'delay', it allows the grenade to penetrate into the ground or building before exploding, again with different damaging mechanisms.

During the night of 16-17 June 2007, Lieutenant-Colonel Querido prepared to move from Kamp Holland towards Chora himself, together with a slimmed down Forward Command Post -he had decided to keep his S2 and S3 at Kamp Holland-, and recce platoon CS 0.5. Rozi Khan, accompanied by 25 men of his militia, was supposed to participate in the move as well.¹⁶⁵ Before Querido left for Chora, he had a meeting with Van Griensven. A major point of concern for both was the complicated command structure that was developing. Soldiers generally prefer a simple command structure, with a single officer commanding the operation. However, many force elements were now being added to the defence of Chora that were not under command of the senior Dutch officers. These elements would include TF-66 -although at this time the unit was not cleared for participation-, which reported in its national line and to ISAF's special forces chain of command, but also Rozi Khan's militia, the ANA and ANP, and the OMLT that formally did not report in the Dutch command line. The latter became a concern as the TFU staff had just decided to reinforce the ANA troops present in Chora.

To mobilise the ANA, commander OMLT Major Bossmann was summoned to the office of Colonel Van Griensven by a runner during the night.¹⁶⁶ Upon arrival, Bossmann was briefed by TFU staff officers on the current situation in Chora. As far as the TFU staff was concerned, a possibility that the White Compound would be overrun by the ACM forces still existed. Bossmann was asked how many Afghan troops might be scraped together to reinforce the ANA/OMLT detachment already in Chora. After the briefing, Bossmann asked the ANA battalion executive officer to wake every able bodied Afghan soldier in order to reinforce the Chora detachment. The other two OMLT members were also woken and briefed. Due to a lack of 4x4s, -the serviceable Ford Rangers were already in Chora- it was decided to fly the ANA troops in by a Chinook helicopter, which was making an ammunition run to Chora anyway in the morning, in two waves. All in all, the Afghan Army Major was able to muster around 50 troops, who were to be accompanied by three OMLT mentors.¹⁶⁷

At this time, it is important to consider that a difference in appreciation of the threat situation had developed between the TFU and A-Coy. Indeed, the TFU had limited communication with A-Coy in Chora due to bad radio connections, and the communication between TFU and BG was strained. Working on aged information, this contributed to the TFU commanders' assessment that the situation in Chora was particularly ominous.¹⁶⁸ As a result, Bossmann was briefed that the situation in Chora was currently unknown, and that the possibility of a 'hot landing zone' was real. Moreover, if the situation at the White Compound was such that the Chinook was not able to land at the White Compound itself, the ANA and OMLT would be dropped off several kilometres further south, at the desert feature commonly known as 'the Saddle'. From there, Bossmann was told to advance to the White Compound on foot, fighting off any ACM present in the area.¹⁶⁹ This perspective led to the OMLT detachment to pack light, preparing for a sustained fight on foot.

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165 Interview Colonel Querido by JP van der Meer, 20/04/2014.

166 Bossmann, "Operational Mentoring and Liaison Team (OMLT) Samenwerken met het Afghaanse Leger." pp. 6-10.

167 Interview Army officer C, 02/04/2020, 22/04/2020; Kooij, G. (2007). *AAR Concerning the Events Around Chora (16-20 June)*. CLAS. Den Haag, NIMH. appendix AAR OMLT.

168 'After Action Review van de Gebeurtenissen in Chora van 15 tot 20 juni 2007', C-CONTCO, p. 7.

169 Interview Army officer C, 02/04/2020, 22/04/2020.

Bossmann and one of the OMLT NCOs would be in the first wave, together with 25 ANA troops and an interpreter, while an OMLT Lieutenant would oversee the second wave of 25 ANA troops, also supported by an interpreter.¹⁷⁰

The ground truth on the White Compound however, was that the situation in Chora had stabilised a bit -likely a result of the TFU's pressure on the ACM-, and both waves were able to land without incident at the White Compound. The ANA troops, now numbering 90, were mentored by the full Army OMLT of six, and made camp at the Brown Compound. Bossmann, surprised by the rather relaxed atmosphere at the White Compound, was briefed by Captain Hamers and the OMLT already present in Chora on the current situation upon arrival.¹⁷¹

In the early morning of June 17, Task Force Viper and B-Coy continued their operation in the Baluchi pass between the Dehrashan and Baluchi Valley in order to disrupt and fix enemy combatants. The BG Forward Command Post, TF-66 and CS 0.5 were on the move towards the Saddle, as TF-66 had received permission to join in, although the Australian restrictions prohibited the Special Forces to take part in any combat operations in the Baluchi Valley.

Viper endured a troublesome infiltration, as the unit's attempts to move through the Uruzgan countryside caused multiple vehicles to get stuck in the terrain.¹⁷² The Dutch SOF were driving in blackout conditions to avoid early recognition by ACM, which did not make the move any easier either. For this operation, Viper concentrated on the Westbank of the Dehrashan Valley, while B-Coy, consisting of CSs 2.6, and 6.9, operated from the Eastbank. During the day, Viper was engaged multiple times by the ACM. The incoming fire was returned by dismounted operators in the green zone, but also by B-Coy's and Viper's vehicles positioned on the high ground. Also, indirect fire and air support was used to suppress the ACM, including from PB Poentjak. The unclassified after-action report composed by Captain Goossens indicates the unprecedented intensity of the fighting:

"2.6 deployed in CROW 2 at first light. 6.9 remained in CROW 1 [both locations were on the east bank of the Dehrashan river]. VIPER moved into action at 07.00. Somewhere around 10.00, VIPER was engaged from the green zone and within minutes 2.6 also drew fire at CROW 2: 82mm, Rocket Propelled Grenades and small arms fire. Despite [the use] of CAS (Close Air Support) by 2x A10, the OMF¹⁷³ did not withdraw and the engagement sustained for more than 2 hours. During the engagement, ICOM was received that OMF were to be reinforced by 150 fighters coming from the CHORA area. Furthermore, a number of OMF key-leaders were present in the DARAFSHAN area during the operation. [...] Besides that, the encounter was much more intense and fierce than on previous occasions and OMF deployed more weaponry.¹⁷⁴

As light faded, the contact drew to a close. B-Coy took position near the village of Shah Mansoor, north of Tarin Kowt, and Viper returned to Kamp Holland. During the move back to Kamp

170 Kooij, G. (2007). AAR Concerning the Events Around Chora (16-20 June). CLAS. Den Haag, NIMH appendix AAR OMLT

171 Email correspondence with L. Hamers, 07/05/2021.

172 Berg, van der. "Een Breed Scala van Special Operations", p. 5.

173 Anti-Coalition Militia and Opposing Military Forces are often used interchangeably.

174 AAR 15-21 June, B-coy 42 BLJ (unclass), undated, personal archive R. Goossens.

Holland, Viper's Patria APC broke down. It was decided that Viper would remain static until the QRF (CS 1.1) would arrive with the necessary spare parts. As the QRF arrived carrying the wrong spare parts, it was decided that part of the Viper patrol would go to Kamp Holland to retrieve the spares. The other half would remain on the location of the Patria in order to secure the location.

Meanwhile, the BG FCP, CS 0.5 and TF-66 arrived at the Saddle, where the commanding officer of TF-66 had to inform Querido that any further participation by the Australian SF detachment was blocked due to national restrictions. TF-66 would thus remain static at the Saddle. CS 0.5 was asked by Querido to move towards the White Compound, to which Lieutenant Lenssen agreed. He decided to move via the Sarab Valley, bypassing the IED-prone Chora-crossing commonly used by TFU platoons. During the move towards Sarab, CS 0.5 was fired upon from the high grounds north and south of its position. Lenssen decided not to fight his way through, but rather to disengage, and to attempt to reach the White Compound using the Chora crossing anyway. During the move back towards to Chora crossing, CS 0.5 was again engaged, this time from the green zone north of the road. After fire was returned, CS 0.5 managed to reach the White Compound without further incident. After a brief talk with Hamers, CS 0.5 moved out to Sarab via the northern approach, circumventing the ACM position from where they received fire earlier that day. As no support could be given to the ANP checkpoints in Sarab, Lenssen decided to return to the White Compound, where they would meet up with Querido, who had also driven towards the White Compound using the Chora crossing.

As TF Viper and B-Coy conducted its combat operation at the south end of the Baluchi Valley, and CS 0.5 fought itself out of two contacts, the Chora District Centre itself remained quiet. "All seemed relatively calm after a raging storm" recalled Hamers.¹⁷⁵ A-Coy's CS 1.2 witnessed the results of the bombardment of the previous night, as the troops observed wounded and killed Afghan civilians. More importantly, intercepted radio messages indicated that the ACM had also suffered significant casualties during the night, including to their leadership, and ACM morale had suffered.¹⁷⁶ *"We kept track [on the events in the Baluchi valley] via EW-reporting [electronic warfare]. ACM leaders quarrelled with their leadership on wanting to retreat from the fight in CHORA and now being threatened in the back. The tone of voice sometimes was hysterical. The fighting in the Chora Valley¹⁷⁷ [Chora District Centre] was limited to an incidental exchange of fire. I remember thanking Ralf [Goossens] on the BG reserve net¹⁷⁸ for taking the pressure off and wishing him the best of luck after the recent events".¹⁷⁹*

Querido drove back to TF-66 in the Saddle and he commenced his return to Kamp Holland with the Australians. The OMLT and the ANA patrolled Ali Shirzai that evening, but no enemy fighters were observed and the joint patrol reported back to the Brown Compound at 2200 hours.¹⁸⁰ In Tarin Kowt, Colonel Van Griensven again briefed the Directorate of Operations of the national Defence

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175 Van Bommel, N. (2009). *Task Force Uruzgan*: p. 67.

176 Ibid.,

177 The Chora District Centre and its adjacent green zone is colloquially known as the 'Chora Valley', although it is formally part of the Baluchi Valley. Hamers' is referring to A-coy's area of operations near Ali Shirzai here.

178 Hamers is referring to a reserve radio net, which is mostly unused, but may be switched to when commanders want to discuss something without claiming the main combat net for prolonged periods of time.

179 Email correspondence with L. Hamers, 07/05/2021.

180 Kooij, G. (2007). *AAR Concerning the Events Around Chora (16-20 June)*. CLAS. appendix AAR OMLT.

Staff in The Hague on the events of the day. The TFU was now well aware of the results of the shelling and bombing during the night, as reports started to come in from the local hospitals on civilian casualties. Van Griensven argued that the Dutch Ministry of Defence had to communicate clearly and openly on the use of ground and air based fire support, as he was convinced of the military necessity of its use, and he was confident that this should be communicated to the Dutch public openly.

June 18

The success of Viper and B-Coy in engaging the ACM south of the Baluchi Valley caused Colonel Van Griensven to consider a repeat of the operation. Although B-Coy would not be available as it was ordered to Chora, Van Griensven requested Viper's CO Van den Berg -who remained at Kamp Holland during the operation- to again attack the south of the Baluchi Valley area in order to fix and destroy any enemy presence, and to force ACM leadership to detach fighters to the south. Van den Berg agreed, as he considered it paramount to support the conventional troops in the Chora district area, even as his SOF operators were facing superior numbers without B-Coy's support. Also, part of the Viper detachment had stayed in Kamp Holland in preparation for future operations as the other half returned to the broken down Patria's location, reducing combat capacity. Eventually four Viper 4x4s returned to the broken-down vehicle during the night with the spare parts, and the Patria was quickly repaired and Viper again infiltrated towards the Baluchi Valley during the remainder of the night.¹⁸¹

By early morning on June 18, TF Viper had arrived at the Baluchi Valley entrance and was immediately engaged by ACM. It was intended to break into a quala at the edge of the green zone, and clear any qualas from that position in a north-eastern direction, finding, fixing and destroying any ACM present, with the intention of relieving pressure on the Chora District. However, Viper had lost the element of surprise due to the first assault on the Baluchi Valley the previous day, and found the ACM well prepared. Viper had to resort to ground based fire support and air assets to assist them in their manoeuvre to break into the quala. For the next few hours, two dismounted Viper squads were engaged in a close-quarter battle with ACM, during which they were fired upon with mortars, rockets and small arms. While the dismounted operators progressed slowly, again with air- and artillery support, Van Griensven's intent was realised. Multiple 4x4s with dozens of fighters were observed moving in from the north.¹⁸²

While Viper was engaged in a firefight, Van Griensven was briefed by his staff back in Kamp Holland. The intelligence section informed Van Griensven that the threat to Chora was still present, and that an unknown number of enemy troops had mingled with the local population, preparing for an assault. Van Griensven was also informed that ACM had suffered significant casualties in the night of 16-17 June, due to coalition ground based fire support and air strikes. The reporting corroborated with Van Griensven's earlier assessment that the interdiction of the ACM offensive was effective, despite the loss civilian life. However, the Chora situation was not the only concern for Van Griensven. ACM activity was also reported near Deh Rawood, in the Mirabad valley and in the Dehrashan. Also, the BG would not be able to sustain this amount of troops in the field beyond June 22.¹⁸³

After his staff meeting he conferred with Querido, as the BG commander was ready to brief the BG's concept of operations to Van Griensven on a counter-offensive. Querido had returned from

■
¹⁸¹ Berg, van der. "Een Breed Scala van Special Operations", p. 6.

¹⁸² Ibid, p. 7.

¹⁸³ Interview Colonel Querido by JP van der Meer, 20/04/2014.

Chora during the night, escorted by TF-66, and was presented in the early morning with several possible courses of action that his staff had prepared during June 17. Both Van Griensven and Querido pushed for a decision in Chora, as Querido briefed the Colonel on the BG concept of operations.¹⁸⁴ The Chora counterattack would be known as Operation Troy (on TFU level)¹⁸⁵ and Operation Fliegenfanger (on BG level). Querido briefed a two-pronged attack, with a northern and a southern axis. His intent was to reoccupy the police stations at Nyazi and Kala Kala, dominating the main lines of communication from The Baluchi Valley towards Chora District Centre in Ali Shirzai. Van Griensven agreed to the plan, however Querido also pushed for more troops. Already, a platoon -CS 3.5- was on the move from Deh Rawood to Tarin Kowt, but the commitment in Chora left the BG stretched in other places. By now, Viper was still in contact, and CS 1.1, acting as QRF, had supported the SOF detachment by delivering the - unfortunately wrong-spare parts.¹⁸⁶ Local militia were considered, however Querido expressed his lack of trust in Rozi Khan's ability to muster the amount of fighters that he claimed he had to his disposal. Still, it was the best that could be done at the time. As the BG might be able to 'clear' the area of enemy fighters, he was reliant on the ANSF to 'hold' the area afterwards. At the time, this was by no means a certainty, leaving Van Griensven unsure on the outcome of the fight. After all, if the BG left without establishing a permanent presence, the battle might be won, but the victory would be to the ACM. After the meeting was concluded, Querido again departed for Chora, escorted by CS 1.1.

Simultaneously, a contingency plan was being made by the BG for the possibility it had to abandon the Chora district. After all, the troop concentration in the Chora district could not be maintained perpetually. It was therefore essential to keep the lines of communications open in case of an evacuation of the town, if it was to be decided to withdraw.¹⁸⁷ Van Griensven stated in reply to the BG staff's request on the issue that Chora would be evacuated if any of four criteria would be met: when the Dutch government ordered him to leave, if no fire support would be available, when the Afghan government or the ANSF would not provide their support, and when the tribal leaders in the area would defect to the ACM.¹⁸⁸ So while the TFU was still adamant in defending Chora, preparations were being made to evacuate if necessary.¹⁸⁹

In Chora, Hamers was surprised by the arrival of a group of Afghan locals at the gates of the White Compound. Unbeknown to him, Rozi Khan was among the group. The Afghans indicated that they had the intention to join the Dutch forces in the fight against the ACM. However, they were short on weapons and ammunition. Hamers knew that the local District Chief had weapons and ammunition in storage, and he subsequently coerced him to provide the local warriors with the needed items. Also, Hamers opted to hand out red-white barrier tape in an attempt to distinguish friend from foe. The local militia donned the tape either around their arms or weapons, making

184 Kooij, G. (2007). *AAR Concerning the Events Around Chora (16-20 June)*. CLAS. Den Haag, NIMH appendix AAR Battlegroup.

185 The planning for Operation Troy was initiated by the TFU staff in the evening of June 16.

186 Interview Army officer H, 20/04/2021.

187 Van Bommel. "Task Force Uruzgan": pp. 75-76.

188 Interview Lt. Gen H. Van Griensven, 05/05/2021.

189 It is important to consider that it is common military practice to plan for different 'courses of action', or COAs. This section aims to elaborate on the staff process that occurs simultaneous to the main effort, which takes different variables taken into consideration that may affect the outcome of a military operation, and how to react on those virtual outcomes.

for a rather odd sight.¹⁹⁰ The result, however, was an equipped and motivated militia under Rozi Khan's leadership.

At around 1000 hours in the morning of June 18, the mortar group of A-Coy fired in support of CS 2.4, the unit that had taken position in the Saddle and was now engaged by ACM with RPGs and small arms.¹⁹¹ At the time the mortar line was positioned within the White Compound walls. One of the BG's NCOs, Sergeant-Major Jos Leunissen, was assisting A-coy's mortar crew. In an unfortunate incident, a mortar grenade that was fed into the tube misfired, which was not noticed as the other tube fired at the same time. When a second grenade was fed on top of the first, the mortar exploded, killing Leunissen and wounding three Dutch soldiers standing close to the mortar. In the adjacent Brown Compound, the explosion was also heard. The OMLT quickly prepared for combat, as at that time it was not yet clear that the explosion was an accident rather than an attack on the compound. One of the OMLT NCOs, trained as a combat life saver, moved to the White Compound to assist with the wounded. The rest of the OMLT and an ANA platoon secured the Landing Zone as a Medevac helicopter moved in to evacuate the wounded and the body of Leunissen. The death of the Sergeant-Major and the three casualties were a blow to morale, as Leunissen was a popular and senior NCO, and was held in great esteem by the men of A-Coy. Still, his death did not impact the upcoming counteroffensive. Different platoons of B-Coy and C-Coy (CSs 2.6 and 3.5, the latter being transferred from Deh Rawood district) were heading to Chora, and CS 2.6 was engaged around 1900 hours south of Chora DC by small arms fire, to which they returned fire with their mortars.

At the beginning of the evening, the SOF Captain leading the operators in the fight at the southern end of the Baluchi Valley decided to withdraw, as ammunition levels were by now dangerously low, and they had been in contact for most of the day.¹⁹² The PzH2000 laid down a smoke screen in order to allow the dismounted element to move back to the vehicles under cover. The PzH2000 and air assets then covered Viper's withdrawal back to Tarin Kowt. After two days of fighting in a supporting role -the assaults on the Baluchi Valley were considered a supporting attack, rather than the main effort-, TF Viper's valuable contribution concluded as they returned back to Kamp Holland. Although no estimations were made public on the amounts of enemy fighters killed, it is assessed that Viper's efforts (on June 17 together with B-Coy) were very useful in drawing in ACM personnel from Chora.¹⁹³

Lieutenant-Colonel Querido moved to Chora again in the afternoon of June 18 with his forward command post and CS 1.1. Upon arrival, he was surprised by the presence of 90 ANA troops and the full six-man OMLT. Apparently, Querido was not previously informed on the ANA reinforcements by the TFU staff, and neither was Hamers until minutes before the ANA had landed the previous day.¹⁹⁴ Querido decided to add an extra axis to his advance on the spot, with a central axis through the green zone, the lush green area irrigated by the river streaming through the Baluchi

190 Email correspondence L. Hamers; 'After Action Review van de Gebeurtenissen in Chora van 15 tot 20 juni 2007', C-CONTCO, p. 10.

191 Kooij. AAR Concerning the Events Around Chora (16-20 June). CLAS. Den Haag, NIMHsupplement E (unclassified) Joint Fires, p. 3.

192 Berg, van der, "Een Breed Scala van Special Operations", p. 7.

193 Ibid.

194 Email correspondence with L. Hamers, 07/05/2021.

Valley. Querido did not inform Van Griensven of the change, but briefed the new battle plan to the commanding officers of A-Coy, B-Coy, CS 0.5 and the OMLT.¹⁹⁵ Rozi Khan was briefed separately.

The plan for the BG companies was simple enough: it was assumed that a substantial number of enemy fighters would be present in the green zone near the western checkpoints Nyazi and Kala Kala and in the eastern area between Chora DC and Sarab.¹⁹⁶ So, A-Coy's CSs 1.2 and 2.6, accompanied by Hamers himself, were ordered to move in western direction, on the northern axis, towards checkpoint Nyazi, supported by an A-Coy sniper team on the high ground. B-Coy, consisting of CSs 1.1, 3.5 and 2.4 together with Captain Goossens' command post, would make the same move on the southern axis towards the Kala Kala checkpoint.¹⁹⁷ The platoon leader of CS 1.1 proposed to clear the green zone south of the river, as the ANA was committed north of the water. Goossens denied the request, as this would further complicate the fire control measures in place, and he was also not in direct radio contact with the OMLT or the ANA.¹⁹⁸ CS 1.1 would have to follow CS 2.4 in the vehicles. Still, CS 1.1 would be the platoon to dismount and engage any ACM when the opportunity presented itself.¹⁹⁹

Static positions were taken by the BG's FCP -including BG commander Querido- at the Saddle, while the ISTAR reconnaissance platoon (CS 6.9) remained at the White Compound on guard duty, as CS 1.3 took its position northeast of this compound, securing the area to the east. CS 0.5 was tasked to screen east of Ali Shirzai, in front of CS 1.3.²⁰⁰ In doing so, CS 0.5 had eyes on Rozi Khan's militia, which was asked to reoccupy the Sarab Hill ANP check point. Querido deliberately separated the efforts of his BG and Rozi Khan's militia, to avoid complications in command and control and possible friendly fire incidents. This also implied that Rozi Khan would have no coalition support in any way, which apparently did not trouble the militia's leader.

Lieutenant Colonel Querido envisioned the ANA/OMLT to advance west over three axes, with the most southern axis south of the river in the green zone. The ANA were light infantry, and as such had little value on the high ground as they lacked vehicles and heavy weaponry. Still, Querido's plan meant that the most southern element of the ANA troops were to move south of the river, and thus isolated from the rest of the Afghan forces. Bossmann advised against this, and Querido subsequently agreed to move the southernmost axis north of the river.

After the commander's brief had ended, Captain Goossens returned to the Saddle, where his company was located, and informed his soldiers on the upcoming operation. Captain Hamers also collected his officers and key staff and briefed them on the clearing operation. Due to all previous movements, both companies were now mixed, and although this could be corrected by some additional movements, it was decided to leave it this way. Goossens now commanded CS

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195 Interview Colonel Querido by JP van der Meer, 20/04/2014; Army officer A, 23/06/2020; Army officer C 22/04/2020.

196 Powerpoint 'Battle of Chora', personal archive R. Goossens.

197 Interview Army officer H, 20/04/2021; Army officer Q, 15/04/2021.

198 Fire control measures are limitations to force elements to engage beyond certain boundaries. These might include direct as well as indirect fire, and these restrictions are generally only lifted after the permission of the commander who had ordered the fire control measures.

199 Email correspondence with R. Goossens.

200 'Tactical overlay Battle of Chora', personal archive R. Goossens.

3.5 from Deh Rawood, originally from C-Coy 42 BLJ, his own CS 2.4 and CS 1.1 from A-Coy. Hamers had CSs 1.2, 1.3 and 2.6 available.²⁰¹ Although it seems odd that platoons were scattered over the companies, it is very common in mechanised units, as infantry, anti-tank and tank platoons are commonly exchanged to create the best mix of firepower, mobility and dismounted capacity for a specific task. Although this process is less common within light infantry battalions, attaching a single platoon to its force structure posed little trouble for the experienced A-Coy staff. As CS 2.6 and CS 6.9 would report to the White Compound not earlier than dawn on June 19, Goossens briefed them that night, and Hamers would re-brief them the next morning to inform them on the details of A-Coy's plan.²⁰²

Bossmann returned to the Brown Compound to brief his team. The OMLT would have to fill in a number of different roles. With no ANA company commander or Afghan company command element present, Bossmann would lead the unit himself. He decided to split his force to three platoon-sized elements, led by an OMLT duo each. Bossmann opted for three officer-NCO pairs, emulating the common platoon leader/platoon NCO structure, that accompanied the three Afghan platoons on three different axes. He put himself in the central axis, allowing for the best situational awareness while the force moved through the green zone. Via commercial off-the-shelf Motorola radios, the three pairs would communicate with each other, whilst Bossmann himself would also liaise with A-Coy, the closest Dutch company via a handheld UHF radio. Via A-Coy, the location and other operational information would be sent up the chain of command to Lieutenant Colonel Querido, who would be positioned near the Saddle, building his situational awareness. Interestingly, no clear rationale could be recalled by the participants as to why the ANA would communicate via a handheld radio to A-coy, who had to liaise to the BG. Given the size and importance of the ANA-axis, a direct link to the BG FCP would be logical. One of the officers involved reflected that fatigue had probably played a role in overlooking this particular communication issue.

The OMLT had no experience leading a company-sized element. In fact, no OMLT-member had worked on company level before, and only half of the OMLT were infantrymen. In addition, this type of manoeuvre had not been practiced before by either the ANA nor the OMLT. Informed by Querido that he might face 250-350 ACM in the green zone, Bossmann was concerned with the unfavourable combat ratio, but also the lack of skills of the ANA, as had been displayed a few days earlier in Seyeddin. After briefing the OMLT, the most senior OMLT NCO talked the scheme of manoeuvre over with Bossmann, bringing forward an important issue; the lack of combat (service) support to the central axis.²⁰³ Operating without supporting enablers was quite common -however disliked- for the OMLT, but considering the ACM's perceived strength, the lack of medics, signallers and engineers was worrisome. This occasional paper has been unable to ascertain if additional support to the OMLT was not requested, or had been denied by the commanding

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201 AAR 15-21 June, B-coy 42 BLJ, (unclass), undated, personal archive R. Goossens

202 Ibid; Interview Army officer A, 23/06/2020.

203 Interview Army officer C, 22/04/2020, Army NCO F, 28/05/2020.

officers, as various sources differ in their accounts.²⁰⁴ However, as it were, the OMLT and ANA would move through the green zone without additional support. Querido acknowledged that the hardest task was given to the least experienced sub-unit, that was de facto not even under his command. In fact, Bossmann would be in his right to decline Querido's orders, as the BG commander was formally not his commanding officer, and neither was Van Griensven. Querido especially had issues with the lack of control he had over the OMLT. Earlier, he had attempted to get the OMLT under the command of the BG, as had been the case with OMLT-1 and OMLT-2²⁰⁵, but was unsuccessful.²⁰⁶ Querido considered the OMLT somewhat of a rogue bunch, and he was on several occasions uninformed on the OMLTs' whereabouts in his area of operations.²⁰⁷ Bossmann did not see any problem there, as he was confident that he had deconflicted all patrols at the company level.²⁰⁸ As it were, both officers disagreed on the ANA and OMLT's place within the force structure, and in the end the OMLT would remain under RC/S's command. The command and control structure of the OMLT was notoriously opaque, and official orders would have to go through the headquarters in Kandahar, which would be too late to materialise. Furthermore, the ANA was also not under Dutch command, and a negative advice by the OMLT to participate in the Dutch-led push would most likely have had a significant impact on the ANA's willingness to participate in combat. These were the command and control issues that worried Van Griensven and Querido the day before, although it did not become problematic as the OMLT and the ANA were willing to partake in the upcoming push.

To mitigate the limitations of the OMLT/ANA combination, Bossmann opted for the simplest of plans.²⁰⁹ His forces would move from east to west in a designated area, search every quala whilst moving forward. To avoid blue-on-blue (friendly fire casualties), the locations of each ANA platoon would be closely monitored by the OMLT members during the advance. Also, Bossmann instructed the OMLT not to walk point, as OMLT casualties would imply a loss of control over the involved ANA platoon, and a loss of situational awareness as it was assumed that the other OMLT soldier would be taking care of the casualty. After all briefings were concluded, the force elements spent the night preparing for the upcoming push, and when possible to get some sleep.

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204 Querido, Bossmann and Goossens all have different recollections concerning this particular event. As the orders brief only included five people, of which some had not slept for several days, it must be concluded that this reason why the OMLT were not allotted supporting personnel will remain an obscurity.

205 During OMLT-2's tenure, the command structure was changed so that the OMLT was no longer a Battlegroup asset.

206 Interview Brigadier General Querido 12/01/2021.

207 Ibid.

208 Interview Army officer C, 22/04/2020.

209 Bossmann. "Operational Mentoring and Liaison Team (OMLT) Samenwerken met het Afghaanse Leger." pp. 6-10.

June 19

In the morning of June 19, Captain Hamers briefed his platoon leaders with the latest information and rehearsed the action on the White Compound stairs. "*[While] sitting around a map and sliding little plastic toy soldiers and wooden vehicles, the plan of attack is being rehearsed one more time*", Captain Hamers would later describe the last moments before the start of the operation.²¹⁰ Already at 0800 hours, positive news came from the Sarab checkpoint, where Rozi Khan had succeeded in regaining the lost checkpoint with his militia. Earlier, Querido had his doubts that Rozi Khan could gather enough fighters, but he delivered; Sarab had been retaken by the ISAF-aligned militia. Then, after the final rehearsal on the map at the White Compound, the Dutch and Afghan troops geared up and marched towards the line of deployment. A show of force by a Dutch F-16 fighter and shots fired by the PzH2000 marked the start of the operation on the three axes at 1025 hours. The start had been postponed because of the unavailability of air assets.²¹¹ In the west, resistance was, anticlimactically, very limited. With no coalition forces present in the south of the Baluchi Valley, ACM fighters had been given every opportunity to disengage from the Dutch concentration of forces in Chora. Shortly after noon, it became clear that a large number of ACM had lost their interest to partake in the hostilities. Some units did receive small arms fire, and B-Coy's CS 3.5 opened up on targets in the green zone. On the northern axis, CS 2.6 had to wait on the Explosive Ordnance Disposal Service to blow up some rocks that were blocking the road to the west. Later that day, CSs 2.6 and 1.2 got engaged by approximately ten fighters with small arms, machineguns and RPGs. A second attack on the northern axis was performed by around fifteen fighters. On the central axis, in the green zone, no severe resistance was experienced by the OMLT and ANA. Quala after quala was searched and although evidence of enemy presence was found during the advance, including still hot tea, food leftovers and RPG safety pins, civilians nor ACM were encountered. However, no bodies or other signs of ACM casualties were observed during the push by the OMLT. The exact location of the OMLT and ANA was somewhat problematic for B-Coy in the south, as Goossens did not have a direct link with Bossmann. It took some effort from A-Coy to relay the OMLT/ANA progress to B-Coy, in order to avoid any friendly fire during the march.²¹² Upon arrival at the objectives, the OMLT duo on the northern part of the green zone marched together with the ANA to checkpoint Nyazi, while the southern pair headed to Kala Kala with its ANA platoon. The third team, which consisted of Bossmann himself and a NCO, got engaged during its last move, while heading to Nyazi as well. After a short firefight and a British jet fighter performing a show of force, the ACM disengaged from the fight, allowing Bossmann and his forces to march towards the Nyazi checkpoint as well. The two checkpoints were manned by the OMLT and ANA until the next day.²¹³ Earlier than expected, and with far less resistance than planned for, the Baluchi Valley had been cleared of ACM, concluding the Battle of Chora.

210 Van Bommel, N. (2009). "*Task Force Uruzgan: Waargebeurde verhalen van onze soldaten [Task Force Uruzgan: Real Life Stories from our Soldiers]*." Amsterdam: JM Meulenhoff bv, p. 69.

211 Interview Lt-Gen H. van Griensven, 06/07/2020.

212 During the push on June 19, some in the OMLT were at times unsure that B-coy's fire was properly deconflicted with the OMLT's and ANA locations. Goossens is however convinced that no fire was directed towards the OMLT, and no casualties were taken.

213 Interview Army NCO E 12/05/2020; Army NCO F, 28/05/2020.

Aftermath of the Battle of Chora

On the day after the counterattack, several platoons and detachments returned to Kamp Holland, including the FCP of the BG, CSs 1.2, 1.3, 2.4 and 3.5, the PRT mission team and ISTAR reconnaissance element. CSs 0.5, 1.1 and 2.6 would stay in the area, accompanied by the OMLT, ANA and a psyops element. It was planned that around fifty ANA soldiers would leave the Chora area on June 21. On June 20, multiple quala searches were conducted by the OMLT and ANA from Nyazi and Kala Kala, together with the remaining BG platoons. The units that conducted searches from Nyazi were facing a short moment of intensity when they were fired upon whilst clearing a quala. After the initial burst of fire, the single enemy fighter quickly withdrew before he could be engaged by OMLT and ANA, and no casualties were taken by the coalition forces either.²¹⁴

In Chora it was planned that ANP police officers would occupy the recaptured checkpoints, although this had not materialised when the line of departure was crossed by own troops on June 19. Also during Operation Troy, the arrival of new Afghan police forces to staff the reoccupied checkpoints Nyazi, Kala Kala and Sarab was opposed by the TFU staff as these policemen were under-equipped and would further obscure the command and control relationship. The most preferable option to man the checkpoints Nyazi and Kala Kala once recaptured was the ANSF, followed by Rozi Khan's militia, and considered least favourable would be AHP commander Matiullah Khan.²¹⁵ During the counterattack, Matiullah Khan was in Kabul, waiting for the TFU to request for his support and assistance via Karzai.²¹⁶ If so, the president would have offered Matiullah's help to the situation in Chora. This would implicitly make Matiullah the new Chief of Police in Uruzgan, as explained in an earlier section. Eventually at the end of June 20, the checkpoints of Nyazi and Kala Kala were transferred to the ANSF, so that the OMLT and ANA could return to the Brown Compound. The three OMLT mentors were relieved after some days by the other OMLT group, who had returned to Tarin Kowt earlier and were now back to relieve their colleagues. Over the next few days, the OMLT performed Battle Damage Assessment (BDA) patrols with the ANA and BG platoons towards the town of Qal'eh-ye Ragh.²¹⁷

Although the outcome of Operation Troy was deemed a success, with only sporadic fighting on the final day between ACM and Dutch/ANA elements, the fighting between 15 and 19 June had also resulted in collateral damage. After the Battle of Chora, Van der Voet immediately dispatched several PRT officers to assess the number of civilian casualties. The PRT officers checked in on the Chora District, the Tarin Kowt hospital as well as local leadership in Ali Shirzai. As common in Islamic countries, deceased were buried within 24 hours, and Van der Voet was aware that after that period, little opportunity would remain to accurately assess the number of casualties. Still, despite the efforts, the PRT was unable to provide an accurate number of civilian life lost, and had to settle with an 50-80 estimate as sources contradicted each other, and no clear divide could be made between ISAF and ACM-caused fatalities. Also, between 50 and 100 Afghans civilians

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214 Interview Army officer G, 30/05/2020; Army officer F, 28/05/2020.

215 Kitzen. *The Course of Co-option*, p. 410.

216 Interview Lt-gen H. van Griensven, 06/07/2021; Kitzen. *The Course of Co-option*, p. 408.

217 Joining the ANA on that patrol was an embedded journalist. See: Boom, J. (2011). *Als een nacht met duizend sterren: oorlogsjournalistiek in Uruzgan*, Podium bv Uitgeverij.

were reported wounded due to the violence.²¹⁸ The estimated number of civilian casualties were reported in the ISAF and national chain of command, and would form the impetus for the aforementioned investigations. Despite the call to evacuate because of these upcoming bombings, not all qualas had been abandoned by the local population. In the aftermath of the fighting, a shurawas held with local leadership, with Van Griensven in attendance.²¹⁹ Ex gratia fees were offered to local Afghan civilians affected by the fighting by the PRT. Several days later, COM ISAF, U.S. four-star general Dan McNeill, also attended a shura in Chora. At this meeting, several Afghan government officials were present, carrying “suitcases filled with money”, supposedly to compensate the local populace for the endured violent episode.²²⁰

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218 Kooij. AAR *Concerning the Events Around Chora (16-20 June)*.

219 Interview Army Officer B, 23/04/2020; Interview Lt-Gen H. van Griensven, 06/07/2020.

220 Email correspondence with L. Hamers, 07/05/2021.

Chapter 7 Analysis

The continuing interest in the Battle of Chora might be traced back to an important discrepancy: the presentation of the Battle of Chora as a military victory by the Dutch Army, contrasted by the claims made by Dutch lawyers and left wing political parties that excessive violence has been used and the ROEs have been violated.²²¹ On first glance, the 2007 Battle of Chora does not seem to be a particularly relevant event in Dutch military history. This occasional paper on the Battle of Chora details common military subjects such as the fog of war, a dearth of reliable and accurate intelligence, the need for unity of command and effort, and how senior officers become involved in local politics as a direct result of their presence during a stabilisation or COIN intervention. Other topics described in this occasional paper are also a reiteration of common military issues, as for instance most commanding officers have issues with the quantity and quality of the allotted means. Indeed, in the grand scheme of military history, the Battle of Chora is a rather minor skirmish. Many similarly sized operations have been conducted during the Afghanistan War, even in the same time frame; Canadian and UK forces were engaged in similar operations in neighbouring Kandahar and Helmand provinces. Still, the Battle of Chora was presented as something extraordinary for the Dutch Army. However, any exuberance over the military victory was later nuanced by inquiries regarding the legality of the escalation of force. This analysis aims to elaborate on both the importance of the Battle of Chora to the Dutch military and wider society, as well as to provide context in order to comprehend the military decision making processes that guided the Dutch operation.²²²

First, it is important to consider that the Dutch Armed forces did not have a bellicose international reputation after the 1995 Fall of Srebrenica. The inability of the Dutch forces in Bosnia to prevent Serbian forces from capturing the UN 'safe area' they protected,²²³ as well as the mission impossible to stop the transportation and later execution by Serb forces of 8,000 Bosniaks/Bosnian Muslim men had left an international suspicion regarding the Dutch forces' will to fight.²²⁴ Despite being devoid of air support, heavy weapons or indeed a strong mandate for the protection of civilians, the Dutch Army -and 13 Battalion especially as it was the unit involved in the events in the Srebrenica enclave at that time- still carried that stigma in 2007. Grandia indicated in her dissertation that the Fall of Srebrenica was indeed a factor of influence in the decision to deploy to Uruzgan in the first place, with Dutch policy makers keen to correct the image of risk-averseness by opting to join ISAF as a lead nation in a hazardous southern province.

Srebrenica and Chora are nonetheless highly dissimilar; the geography, demography, military equipment and mandate were different. For some within the Dutch Army, however, the risk to wander in another situation of military inaction when pressure was put on the deployed military

221 Teuben and Koppe. Pleitnota Rechtbank Den Haag, Zaaknummer C/09/604819 en C/09/581972, pp. 4-5.

222 Deliberately, this occasional paper does not debate the legality of Van Griensven's decisions, as the public prosecutor has not found any wrongdoing. This conclusion has been supported by multiple independent reports.

223 See Netherlands Institute for War Documentation (2002). *Srebrenica: een 'veilig' gebied Reconstructie, achtergronden, gevolgen en analyses van de val van een Safe Area*. Boom, see <https://www.niod.nl/nl/srebrenica-rapport/rapport> accessed 05/05/2021.

224 Grandia, *Deadly embrace: the decision paths to Uruzgan and Helmand*, p. 114; Fairweather, J. (2014). *The Good War: Why We Couldn't Win the War or the Peace in Afghanistan*, Random House, pp. 170, 176-177.

force, were reminiscent of the 1995 UN mission in Bosnia. Hamers, himself a Dutchbat III veteran, indeed stated to his superior officers that he was rather unwilling to “abandon another enclave”.²²⁵ Other sources also indicated that the Fall of Srebrenica had influence on the TFU staff process.²²⁶ Still, the commanding officer of the TFU, and therefore responsible for the decision to stay and defend Chora, is adamant that ‘Srebrenica’ had not influenced his decision making process directly, although he admitted that it might have played a role subconsciously.

It is clear however, that in the wake of the successful clearing operation on June 19, the Battle of Chora became a form of absolution for the Dutch Army. In Afghanistan, the Dutch armed forces did not shirk as ACM pressure increased, -which was not the case either in Srebrenica, however it was perceived as such in the years following the 1995 debacle- and this was exploited in the subsequent dissemination of the events during the so-called ‘Chora road shows’. The ensuing labelling of the fighting between 15-19 June as ‘the Battle of Chora’ should thus be seen in this context. By describing it as a ‘battle’, the point that the campaign in Uruzgan was not solely a reconstructing mission was driven home in the Netherlands. However, the term could be considered somewhat of a misnomer, as a significant part of the fighting was done in other areas than Chora, for instance by B-Coy and Viper in the upper Dehreshan area. Moreover, the description of the Battle of Chora as such should be regarded in contrast to the low-intensity peacekeeping missions in which the Dutch armed forces had been involved in the preceding decades, rather than the World War II types of large scale engagement - D-Day, Arnhem, Korea etc.- which are frequently associated with the word. As far as the Battle of Chora goes, it does indeed not agree with the Clausewitzian perception of the use of (organised) engagement (*org. Gefechte*) to further the object of the war in an interstate setting.²²⁷ Not only was the object of the war not defined, neither had the Dutch government agreed that it was involved in a war at all (and for the duration of the Uruzgan campaign never would).²²⁸

Moreover, the reciprocity needed to constitute a ‘battle’ was lacking on June 19, as the ACM had mostly abandoned the fight after a number of platoon and company sized engagements, including fire and air support, during the days prior. Rather, the temporary intensity of combat as experienced in Chora in June 2007 are descriptive of ‘a battle’ in a counterinsurgency context, as the hostilities in Uruzgan in 2007 should be considered to be on a higher level of intensity compared to what is commonly encountered during counterinsurgency operations. Indeed, contemporary battles during the Afghan counterinsurgency show the same tendency of decreased hostilities after a period of attrition. For instance, the 2007 Battle for Musa Qala in Helmand was concluded in a similar way, as the ACM withdrew after being outmanoeuvred by the British -both mentally as well as physically- during the previous weeks.²²⁹ The 2006 Operation Medusa in Kandahar province is another case in point.²³⁰

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225 Bommel, van, *Task Force Uruzgan*, p. 65, 78.

226 Masters, *No Front Line*, p. 153.

227 Clausewitz, C. von, *On war*, translation by Howard, M., & Paret, P. (1976). (Vol. 117). Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press. p. 128.

228 Duchêne, P.A.L., and Pouw, E.H. (2010). *ISAF operaties in Afghanistan: oorlogsrecht, doelbestrijding in counterinsurgency, ROE, mensenrechten & ius ad bellum*. Nijmegen Wolf Legal Publishers, p. 43.

229 For an account of the Battle for Musa Qala see: Grey, S. (2010). *Operation Snakebite: the explosive true story of an Afghan desert siege*. Penguin UK.

230 For an account of Operation Medusa, see: Horn, B. (2010). *No Lack of Courage: Operation Medusa, Afghanistan*. Dundurn.

So, considering recent Dutch military history, it is understandable that the Dutch Army had an interest in a positive narrative concerning its military exploits. This sentiment was not shared by everyone, as the enduring cycle of investigations, questions by Parliament and (mostly) critical media reporting since 2007 indicates. The escalation of force to support the defence of Chora has proven to be a contentious decision, as it has shown to be disagreeable to activist lawyers and left-wing political parties. The second part of this analysis will thus focus on the context of military decision making before, during and after the Battle of Chora, and by doing so elaborating on the variables that led Colonel Van Griensven to making those decisions.

Considering the ACM pressure on Chora and the TFU force composition, Colonel Van Griensven had two important decisions to make on his level. First, whether or not the Dutch would defend the Chora District Centre, or withdraw from the town. As presented in this paper, both cases had its merits, however Van Griensven opted to stand and fight. The second major decision was whether or not to use the PzH2000 on unobserved targets in the Baluchi Valley, as well as JTAC-controlled air assets during the night of 16 to 17 June.

The latter decision had incendiary potential, especially in a COIN campaign like ISAF's, but the reason Van Griensven had to resort to the use of ground based fire support might be traced back to the insufficient force numbers of the TFU. Indeed, the Dutch were spread thin, a direct result of political decisions ex ante the deployment of the Dutch troops during the planning phase. The Uruzgan mission had been capped to 1200 troops, a number already deemed insufficient by the first BG in the province. The cap however was partly based on an advice by senior staff of the Dutch Ministry of Defence, concerned that any more would not be politically palatable.²³¹ Also, previous experiences in Iraq during the Stabilization Force Iraq (SFIR) deployments were indicative for Dutch policy makers to cap the size of the ISAF contingent on 1,200. So, unable to field enough troops to counter the perceived threat, Van Griensven was drawn in the quagmire of Afghan and alliance politics to scrape enough forces together for a successful defensive operation when it was decided that the Chora DC was to be held. As this basically opened up a third ADZ -not de jure, but certainly de facto- the BG became overstretched, as the ADZs in Deh Rawood and Tarin Kowt also had to be secured. In neighbouring Helmand, the British had encountered similar problems of overstretching their force, however come February 2007, the British Army already had beefed up its force numbers with an additional 1,200 combat troops to around 4,500.²³² Options to increase the number of Dutch combat troops were present, albeit temporarily. The Dutch Marine Corps was largely uncommitted, as well as being a high readiness force and thus deployable quickly. Moreover, changing the deployment period to the internationally more common six-month term would have provided a degree of sustainment for the small Dutch Armed Forces. As it were, Van Griensven had little left to manoeuvre with, and decided on the use of indirect fire to take the pressure off his troops.

The main rationale for Van Griensven to resort to indirect fire support was the perceived threat of his forces being overrun by superior ACM numbers. Yet, the estimated number of enemy

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231 Grandia, *Deadly embrace: the decision paths to Uruzgan and Helmand*, p. 121.

232 Directorate Land Warfare, *Operation HERRICK Campaign Study* (declassified version) p. xviii.

fighters varied wildly in the period before and during the Battle of Chora. As this occasional paper indicates, the estimated total number of enemy fighters reportedly fluctuated between 150 to 1,000. A more accurate assessment of the enemy's strength, force composition and intent would have allowed military commanders to develop a bespoke scheme of manoeuvre to counter the opposing force. Lacking accurate intelligence hampers military planning.²³³ The '1,000' number, however, was repeatedly reported by the intel community before the Battle of Chora, as indicated by the entry in the diary of one of the platoon leaders in Chora.

Several reasons could be presented for this variable number. Firstly, Afghan reporting is often inconsistent, i.e. 'a lot' could be described as '100' or '500'. Officers in the field quickly learned to downscale ICOM-reporting and reports by local nationals. In this case, Afghan authorities (through the PRT and the OMLT) reported on the low side. Secondly, it is possible that reports coming in from different locations were counted more than once, as the ACM moved around the greater Tarin Kowt area. However, the TFU intelligence section repeatedly reported that it was not possible to give the commander an accurate report on the number of enemy. Therefore, it would seem plausible that the senior officers erred on the side of caution, and accepted the higher numbers in the decision making process. Querido himself considers the possibility that an 'outer ring of local fighters who have joined the movement for a variety of non-ideological reasons' were reluctant to fight after ACM leadership had been killed during the opening days of the battle.²³⁴

In any case, the BG argued that the exact number of enemy fighters did not affect its decision making, as the staff planned on a 'significant number of enemy combatants'.²³⁵ Indeed, even the lower estimates would provide the enemy force with enough impetus to successfully assault the poorly located (defensively) White Compound. Still, a strong argument could be made on the relevance of the difference between the higher and lower estimates of enemy strength, although in this case the BG commander was apparently unsure on the numbers involved as well, constructing his scheme of manoeuvre around the strengths of the Dutch forces as he was unable to field any more infantry anyway. How and why the estimations on the number of enemy combatants deviated in such a way could not be retrieved by this research and thus for now remains something of an obscurity. The same goes for the actual number of enemy combatants present in June 2007 in the Chora district. Although the higher estimates were in retrospect almost certainly exaggerated, Querido's and Van Griensven's decision to work with the higher estimates in the planning process is understandable considering the stakes in the Chora district, and the common practice of planning for 'worst case scenarios' in regular armies.

Still, the discussion on the number of fighters should also be put in its context. In regular combat scenarios, a ratio of one defender to three attackers (or vice versa) is generally preferred. This ratio is however relevant to the concept of combat power, not necessarily on the number of combatants. Although it could be agreed that the Dutch forces were outnumbered in Chora, it has to be taken into consideration that the Dutch contingent in Chora was better trained and

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²³³ However, that is knowledge in hindsight. The research indicates that at the time, the numeric superiority seemed evident.

²³⁴ Interview Brigadier General Querido, 11/05/2021.

²³⁵ Voordracht Vaandelopschrift Afghanistan Regiment Limburgse Jagers.

equipped, and could rely on air cover as well as accurate ground-based fire support. These factors have to be taken into consideration in order to make a distinction between superior numbers and superior combat power. It does however validate the decisions to employ ground based fire support and air assets, as other means to tip the balance were unavailable to Dutch military leadership at the time. This observation leads to the main point of contention for the TFU-commander: his decision to employ artillery in support of his troops, without direct observation on the target area in a two-hour time frame on June 17. Although in retrospect this decision held up to legal scrutiny, the other options would be to yield, or to meet the ACM on more equal terms in the field, with a larger possibility of casualties. As it were, the latter options were discarded during the decision making process.

Querido's initial reluctance to stay and defend the Chora District Centre is understandable in this light. Holding on to Chora DC was in line with the campaign plan, however it was clear from the start that Dutch forces would have trouble to sustain that effort. Moreover, it would be in disagreement with the COIN concepts as laid out by BG-3's predecessors, as Chora was nowhere near the 'edges of influence'. Even when disregarding that issue, it was clear that Dutch political commitment to Uruzgan was limited from the start, with only a two year timeframe agreed upon by the Dutch government, starting in 2006.²³⁶ Considering that to the Dutch government the main political goals had already been reached by being merely present in Uruzgan, it is understandable that commanding officers were unsure on the political stance on high risk endeavours.²³⁷ Furthermore, as the Dutch government had been rather reluctant - up until the battle - to admit that combat was a common occurrence in Uruzgan, it was not clear and obvious to the senior commanders that the Dutch government would agree with the high levels of force that would be needed to counter the ACM offensive in Uruzgan. Indeed, Querido openly questioned whether he would be given the rules of engagement extensions he considered necessary to fight the ACM. In retrospect, withdrawing from Chora would have fit in a series of risk mitigation measures pursued by the Dutch government. Still, Van Griensven's decision to defend the Chora District Centre held up, which led to the expansion of the Uruzgan area that was to be secured by the TFU, and an increased sense of reassurance for the Dutch Army in its combat abilities. Lastly, the Battle of Chora limited the influence of the ACM in Chora and as an unforeseen by-product, the balance of power started shifting towards a new equilibrium. Barakzai leader Rozi Khan, one of the most powerful political players in the area, was now an established ally of the TFU, and also a durable connection with the Barakzai/Achekzai power block of Abdul Khaleq was established. The Battle of Chora therefore should not only be considered on its military merits, but also as an increase of TFU credibility towards a large part of the population of Uruzgan. By defending the Chora District Centre, the Task Force Uruzgan was able to increase its influence over the local population. Kitzen concluded in his dissertation that *"all in all, the Dutch fighting forces, which were deployed as part of a population-centric plan to protect Chora in cooperation with local allies, had brought the TFU an amount of leverage exceeding the results achieved by the limited tools of influence previously employed"*.²³⁸

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236 Parliamentary Papers II 2005-06, 27925 193/194/195.

237 Wiltenburg, I.L. and M. v.d. Vorm (2019). "Small State Strategic Thinking: the Case of the Netherlands." *The Strategy Bridge*. (september 2019)

238 Kitzen. *The Course of Co-option*, p. 412.

Alas, the ACM would return to the Chora District by the end of 2007, and remained active in challenging coalition forces over influence in the district until the end of 2009.

Chapter 8 Recommendations for further research

This research was based on a plethora of sources, including interviews with many enlisted service members and officers. Therefore, we are confident that within its aim, this occasional paper provides a comprehensive and near complete overview of the Dutch military efforts - in preparation and execution- surrounding the Battle of Chora. However, this research focuses on the military decision making and the execution of the Battle of Chora, omitting several highly relevant actors. This occasional paper therefore acknowledges that further research should be done in the role of the Afghan National Army, and by extension the role of the local Afghan interpreters, as well as the Australian forces. Also, the reactions of the Chora residents on the hostilities have not been included in this occasional paper. Moreover, this occasional paper only touches on the decision making processes that must have occurred simultaneously in The Hague, Canberra, Kabul and the ISAF Headquarters, leaving opportunities for further research. Lastly, more attention could be given to the BG and TFU staff processes which have occurred simultaneously with the unfolding of events in Chora.

In conclusion, this occasional paper has attempted to draw from as many sources as possible to find as much common ground as feasible. Some statements could however not be confirmed. These include claims that the June 15 suicide attack in Tarin Kowt was the start of the ACM's Chora offensive. As sources differ in their account, this could be neither confirmed or denied. The same goes for the common presentation of the ACM's offensive as the main effort of the 2007 fighting season. Again, sources differ on their interpretation as the Chora offensive is also frequently described as a ACM attempt to draw away the coalition focus from operations in Kandahar. Another point of contention is the claim whether RC/S commander Jacko Page approved (as Colonel Van Griensven repeatedly stated) or indeed questioned the TFU plan for indirect fire support on the night of 16-17 June. Further research might be able to provide more conclusive evidence on these matters.

Epilogue

The permanent presence in Ali Shirzai was to last, and the clearing operation during the Battle of Chora was the first in a pattern of clear-hold-build operations in the subsequent three years. Beginning with the next clearing operation at the end of 2007, operation Spin Ghar, most subsequent battalion-sized operations would result in a permanent presence in Uruzgan Province, indicating that the Battle of Chora operation served as a benchmark effort for the Dutch COIN campaign in Uruzgan.²³⁹

After the Battle of Chora was concluded, BG-3 had to prepare to hand over its responsibility to BG-4, with Hamers' company being relieved by another company of 13 RSPB. The ANA and the OMLT would also maintain a presence in Chora, initially in the Brown Compound, but after a few weeks a larger quala was rented and reinforced. This quala was named PB Mirwais and would serve as an ANA patrol base, located a few hundred meters to the west of the White Compound.²⁴⁰ Rozi Khan was appointed the provisional District Chief of Chora, which was confirmed after elections in June 2008. Unfortunately, he was killed by Australian Special Forces in a friendly-fire incident on September 17 that same year.

The 2007 Battle of Chora remains relevant for another reason: it led to the debate on the legality of the use of stand-off kinetic force by Dutch troops under certain circumstances, which remains contested. It is in this debate, however, that the context of how and why commanding officers resorted to the use of certain weapon systems is often disregarded. This paper presents this context, and to assist a better understanding of the decision making processes preceding the use of said weapon systems.

During the Battle of Chora, many individual acts of bravery by Dutch troops were observed, resulting in multiple individual decorations for valour. Moreover, battle honours on regimental colours have been awarded for the efforts during the spring and early summer of 2007. On September 11, 2019, the regimental colours of both Infantry Regiment 'Limburgse Jagers' and Infantry Regiment 'Stoottroepen Prins Bernhard' were decorated with the battle honours 'Uruzgan 2007' for the regiment's efforts during the prelude of the Battle of Chora, including Operation Hunter Fox (in the case of 42 RLJ) and the June 2007 Battle itself. The efforts of Task Force Viper during the Battle also contributed to the battle honours on regimental colours of the Royal Netherlands Marine Corps and the Korps Commandotroepen. This last unit also received the Military Order of William in 2016, the oldest and highest honour for valour of the Kingdom of the Netherlands and named after the first Prince of Orange, partly for their efforts during this combat action.²⁴¹

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239 The Battle of Chora is distinctive in that it was a reaction on an ACM offensive, rather than pre-planned in the Netherlands.

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

241 See: <https://zoek.officielebekendmakingen.nl/stb-2019-335.html>, <https://wetten.overheid.nl/BWBR0042678/2019-12-01>, <https://www.defensie.nl/actueel/nieuws/2019/10/18/vaandelopschrift-uruzgan-voor-18-eeenheden>, <https://www.korpscommandotroepen.nl/actueel-nieuws/korps-commandotroepen-onderscheiden-uitzonderlijke-dapperheid/> accessed 26/05/2021.

Individual military personnel was awarded different kinds of decorations for their valour. Corporal First Class Derk-Jan Veneberg (13 RSPB) was decorated with a 'Kruis van Verdienste' for his efforts during the recapture of checkpoint Kala Kala on April 29.²⁴² Four operators from Task Force Viper were given decorations as well,²⁴³ while OMLT commander Captain Stephan Bossmann was awarded a 'Bronzen Leeuw' for his actions during the Battle. The other five members of the Army OMLT received a 'Sculptuur Operationeel Optreden' with its accompanying decorations, the Army's highest individual reward for operational efforts.²⁴⁴ Captains Larry Hamers and Ralf Goossens, sergeant Nanne Streekstra (42 RLJ) as well as Corporals Jordi Benning (13 RSPB) and Björn were also awarded this decoration, and Hamers was awarded the NATO Meritorious Service Medal as well.²⁴⁵ Lastly, TFU commander Hans van Griensven was awarded the 'Ereteken van Verdienste in Goud', the highest ministerial award for his work as the TFU commanding officer.

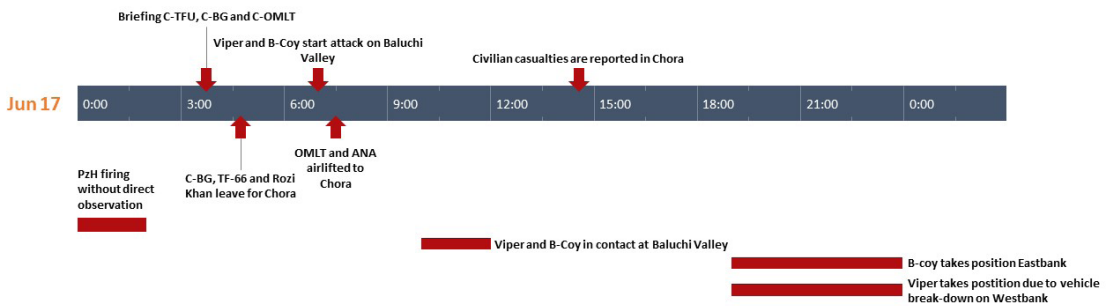
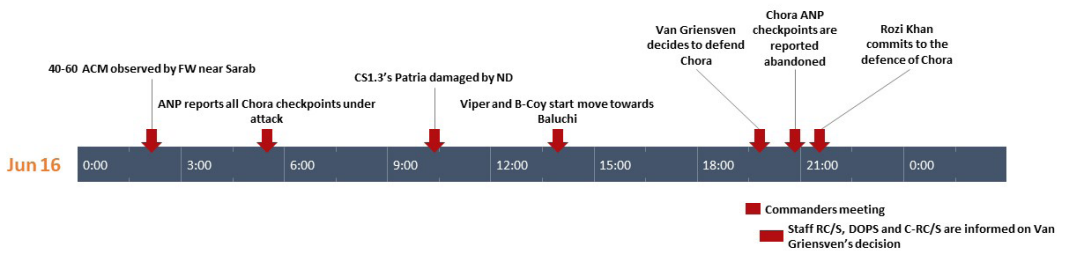
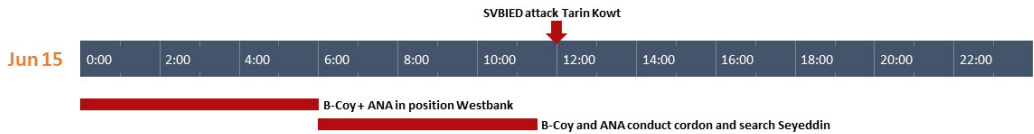
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242 "Kruis van verdienste voor korporaal-1 Dennie Veneberg: 'We gaven de vijand een koekje van eigen deeg'.", *Landmacht* 7 (november 2008), p. 39.

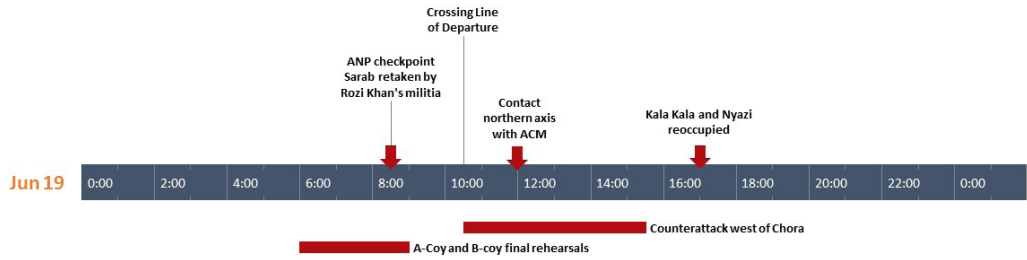
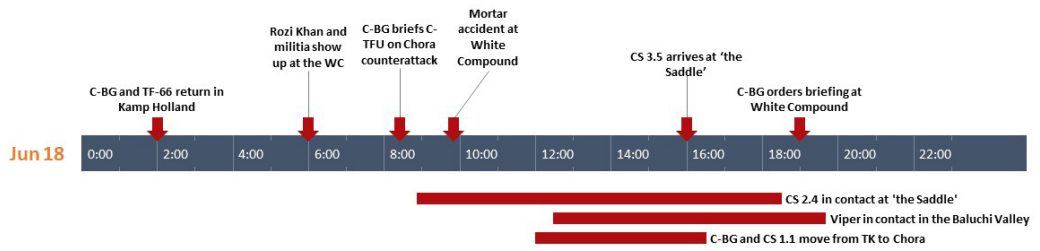
243 See: <https://www.korpscommandotroepen.nl/stichting/traditie/erelijsten/onderscheidingen-1995-heden> accessed 26/05/2019.

244 The recipient of the 'Sculptuur Operationeel Optreden' was initially allowed to wear a silver aiguillette, however this was later changed to a medal, the 'Ereteken van Verdienste in Brons'.

245 See: https://magazines.defensie.nl/landmacht/2016/02/05_zilver-en-brons-voor-uitblinkers-goud-waard, http://onderscheidingen.nl/decorandi/vrops/dec_a01.html accessed 26/05/2021.

Timelines





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List of Acronyms

ACM	Anti-Coalition Militia
ADZ	Afghan Development Zone
AHP	Afghan Highway Police
ANA	Afghan National Army
ANP	Afghan National Police
ANSF	Afghan National Security Forces
BDA	Battle Damage Assessment
BG	Battlegroup
CAT	Combined Arms Team
CO	Commanding Officer
COIN	Counterinsurgency
DOPS	Directorate of Operations
ICOM	Intercom, colloquially referred to as a walkie-talkie
ISAF	International Security Assistance Force
ISTAR	Intelligence, Surveillance, Target Acquisition, and Reconnaissance
JTAC	Joint Terminal Attack Controller
KCT	Korps Commandotroepen
MB	Mercedes Benz
NAC	North Atlantic Council
NATO	North Atlantic Treaty Organization
NIST	National Intelligence Support Team

OEF	Operation Enduring Freedom
OMF	Opposing Military Forces
OMLT	Operational Mentoring and Liaison Team
PB	Patrol Base
PRT	Provincial Reconstruction Team
PzH2000	Panzerhaubitze 2000
SF	Special Forces
SOF	Special Operations Forces
RLJ	Regiment Limburgse Jagers
RSPB	Regiment Stoottroepen 'Prins Bernhard'
SUA	Smallest Unit of Action
TFU	Task Force Uruzgan

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