

Inside the Taliban's deadly ambush

Using heaviest weapons in their arsenal, a specially recruited squad lay in wait for Canadians near site of fearsome 2006 battle

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KANDAHAR, AFGHANISTAN -- The ambush that killed three Canadians this week was a carefully planned trap, using an elite team of Taliban fighters and the insurgents' most powerful weapon to strike in a symbolic location near the scene of Canada's bloodiest battles of the mission.

This detailed account of the attack, from a well-informed Afghan government official in Kandahar with strong Taliban contacts, suggests the insurgents were frighteningly organized for the Sept. 3 ambush.

While some parts of his story were confirmed by military sources, other information could not be checked.

The official said the attack was planned by Mullah Mohibullah, an insurgent leader who also serves as chief judge for the parallel Taliban legal system in a cluster of villages known as Nalgham, about 35 kilometres west of Kandahar city.

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It is not known whether any senior insurgents ordered Mr. Mohibullah to organize the attack, but he is a long-time friend of Mullah Obaidullah, the former defence minister for the Taliban regime, who has been repeatedly arrested by Pakistan but who is now believed to be living freely in the borderlands and is one of the Taliban's leading figures in the southern insurgency.

Instead of relying on his own men for the attack, Mr. Mohibullah apparently circulated a request among Taliban groups in the region, asking each of them to donate two or three of their best fighters and equip them for a dangerous mission.

"He asked for only the strongest fighters, for a big attack on a convoy," the official said. "In total, he got about 45 fighters with good weapons, like 82-millimetre guns, rocket launchers and heavy machine guns."

The Canadians have refused to say where the attack happened, but four sources said the insurgents set their trap near Chaman Bazaar, on the north side of the Arghandab River.

Located in an area known as Pashmul about 15 kilometres west of Kandahar city, the dilapidated shops have been largely abandoned because of fighting that has racked the area for years, especially around a ruined school that has previously served as a hideout for insurgents. The white-walled school, pockmarked with bullet holes, became infamous among Canadian troops on Aug. 3, 2006, when

four soldiers were killed nearby, and four more died advancing toward the school on Sept. 3, 2006, during the early stages of Operation Medusa.

Canadian troops have spent the following two years trying to keep hold of Pashmul, building a paved road through the grape fields, setting up small outposts and mentoring Afghan security forces on patrol. But the Afghan official said that did not stop the Taliban fighters from staging a large ambush, positioning gunmen on a hill overlooking the road and planting a bomb nearby.

"First they exploded a land mine and afterwards they attacked the convoy," the official said. "It was a big convoy. The fighting lasted a long time."

Canadian military officials say the soldiers were not killed by a bomb, and the Taliban did not attack with any new weapon that was previously unknown in their arsenal. That points toward the 82-millimetre recoilless rifle as the likely cause of the worst casualties. The heavy anti-tank weapon is capable of punching a hole through Canadian armoured vehicles, but it is cumbersome and not often used by the insurgents as they rely on speed to get away after their usual hit-and-run attacks.

In fact, it appears the insurgents did have trouble escaping after their initial strike; the Afghan official described other insurgent groups in the district arriving shortly afterward to rescue their comrades from the Canadians' fierce counterattack. Canadian military officials have described how the surviving soldiers, even the wounded, returned fire against the ambushers.

"When essentially the shit hit the fan yesterday, we had three casualties and five others [injured]," said Lieutenant-Colonel Dave Corbould, commander of the Canadian battle group. "The platoon quickly grabbed the initiative, immediately won the firefight, took care of its casualties, got them evacuated to a proper medical facility, all as they'd been trained."

Three of the injured Canadians were flown to a military hospital in Landstuhl, Germany, for further treatment yesterday. Another injured soldier, Private Glen Kirkland, was rolled onto the tarmac at Kandahar Air Field in a wheelchair for a sunset ceremony as the three caskets of his slain colleagues were carried into the back of a transport plane for return to Canada.

Pte. Kirkland, with red wounds on his face and neck, lifted himself out of his wheelchair to salute the caskets as they passed, and later hobbled up the ramp of the waiting plane for a last goodbye to his friends.

The battle group's chaplain, Captain Darren Persaud, said members of the platoon share a prayer before and after each of their missions.

He read aloud from one of their favourite verses, Psalm 91: "You will not fear the terror of the night, nor the arrow that flies by day," he said, speaking to hundreds of sombre soldiers who attended the ceremony. "... A thousand may fall at your side, and ten thousand at your right hand, but no evil shall come near to you."

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