

Defence Today

Assignment Afghanistan: Operation Ateesh Bazi

July 1, 2008, by Adam Day



PHOTO: ADAM DAY

A little resident of Regay watches the patrol pass.

In the early afternoon of Operation Ateesh Bazi's second day, as our patrol staggered through its 10th hour and third suspected insurgent stronghold, the heat became something more vivid and invasive than a phenomenon of weather should ever be.

Numbers alone cannot contain or relate the effect of that high-noon Afghan desert sun on the brains and bodies of cold-weather-bred Canadians. You get so hot it would be inappropriate to call it hot. You suck at the air. Your body armour cooks you like simmering hot plates strapped to your chest and back and head and you are dimly aware that your systems are being overwhelmed. You feel like you should claw at something.



But still we walked. Somebody said it was 42 C; somebody said it was 44 in the shade. The landscape of villages and mud walls and poppies and sand lost all contrast and saturation until everything looked overexposed and indistinct.

At first we spoke of many things to ease our discomfort. Then we saw mirages. Then our vision got blurry and so instead we dreamed of mirages.

The operation moved on. Fighting-age males were reportedly moving around ominously ahead. The Canadian soldiers literally panted. The sweat reached down to the bottom of their heavy pants. They sweated so much they stopped sweating. At that point, they began to cook. All unnecessary talking stopped. The patrol moved 50 metres and took a 30-minute break. It moved another 50 metres and took a 40-minute break. These are not long distances. Everyone collapsed in whatever shade they could find.

It was no easy job to get here, to the village of Khenjakak, deep in the Panjwai district of Kandahar province. And now that the Canadians and all the Afghan soldiers they could muster had finally made it, all anyone was thinking about was trying to make their water last until the end of the day so they didn't collapse.

Contact with the enemy at any point in the afternoon would have been a dire and truly unwelcomed event. It would have been slow motion chaos—a 20-second run would have combusted the fittest man. Luckily for us it didn't happen, though everyone had expected it would. Instead of Taliban, the Canadians found mostly deserted villages, as if everyone had gone on vacation, probably somewhere cooler to escape the heat. The Taliban, if there were Taliban here, apparently saw the huge mass of Afghan soldiers and the undisclosed amount of Canadian armour that had converged on them from across the province and saw the Kiowa gunships circling overhead and decided that now would be a good time not to pick a fight.

Despite the heat, the Taliban probably made a good choice because nobody was in a very good mood for fighting.

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PHOTO: ADAM DAY

Afghan soldiers sweep into the village of Regay, Panjwai District.

One unit of Afghans on the operation was led by a man the Canadians called Al-Qaeda.

Lieutenant Matiullah got that nickname because of his wispy beard, his devotion to prayer and his penchant for saying 'inshallah'—translation: it will happen if God wills it—to every statement or request, but he just laughs anytime anyone calls him Al-Qaeda.

Matiullah is in charge of 1st Company, 1st Battalion, 1st Kandak, 205 Corps of the Afghan National Army, a unit stationed at Forward Operating Base Sperwan Ghar, a Canadian-run base in Panjwai district, Kandahar province. His other nickname is Shumps. In fact, no one calls him Matiullah; they only call him Shumps, though no one ever told me why.

Shumps is in many ways a typical Afghan soldier: he's proud and brave, mostly jovial but slightly inscrutable—no matter how closely you observe him you're just never quite sure what he's thinking or how he's feeling. He often smiles a lot when he's upset and looks most angry when he's joking. He and his company of Afghan soldiers have four Canadians attached to them as advisers. The Canadians belong to an Operational Mentor and Liaison Team (OMLT), or omelettes as they're always called, which are small groups of Canadian soldiers assigned to operate within an Afghan unit, often a company of infantry soldiers but also police units and others.

Over the course of two days in late April 2008, Shumps and his Canadian mentors joined another Afghan company and a giant force of Canadians in Operation Ateesh Bazi, a complex two-day manoeuvre into an area of Panjwai labelled as an 'insurgent stronghold,' a series of villages that hadn't seen a significant NATO presence in over nine months. While the villages targeted by Ateesh Bazi—Adamzai, Khenjakak and Salavat—were only a few kilometres south of a major Canadian supply route, the area just hadn't been an area of concern for NATO, until now.

At the heart of these villages is a place called Nakhonay which, in the early spring of 2008, was very much the talk of the Canadian soldiers spread around Panjwai. Nakhonay was a place people spoke about in hushed tones at night. Hundreds of Taliban were there, the rumour mill insisted, operating openly in the streets; they'd set up a parallel government and had their own money and ran their own courts. It was all so far-fetched, everyone agreed, that it pretty much had to be true.

In any case, Shumps wasn't worried. Or maybe he was. It was hard to tell. Sometimes he seemed impatient, but maybe he was just bored. The language barrier prevented me from finding out, although even there, on the topic of the English language, Shumps was hard to read. His degree of fluency in English even stumped Captain Matt Aggus, Shumps' OMLT mentor for the last couple of months, and his constant shadow in this operation.

Aggus is a cerebral, almost pensive officer from the Princess Patricia's Canadian Light Infantry and his best guess about Shumps' language skills was that the Afghan officer understood way more English than he let on, but only really reacted to it if it was important or something he really wanted to hear. Later on during the operation, for example, when one of Shumps' soldiers became openly critical of Aggus' map-reading skills, Shumps was for once entirely able to understand the situation without the need for a translator.

Aggus, who looks fit enough to do three consecutive marathons, was not in the least bit phased by this. Shumps' strangely inconstant bilingualism was just another small fact of life for Aggus, something to think about as he looked off at the horizon.

A graduate of Queen's University in Kingston, Ont., Aggus originally wanted to be a doctor but, as he says, he gave up on the idea of fixing people and decided to break them instead. He doesn't mean that of course, black humour being what it is, but it is something he says.

Aggus' role as an OMLT officer is far from easy. He does not command Shumps. Nor is he in charge of training him. Instead, he is simply there to advise, maybe lead by example, and perhaps most importantly to act as a liaison to other NATO forces and air support during operations like Ateesh Bazi.

The general scheme of manoeuvre for Op Ateesh Bazi was for OMLT Major Mark Campbell and Aggus to take the largely Afghan force from Sperwan Ghar down through a suspected insurgent village and link up with the Canadian force of tanks and armour coming out of Forward Operating Base Masum Ghar. After meeting up, the two groups would conduct a live-fire range in the late afternoon before camping in a desert position for the night, heading for the outskirts of Nakhonay at first light.

On the morning of April 24, 2008, day one of Op Ateesh Bazi, as Shumps' Afghan company was rolling out of Sperwan Ghar and heading for the biggest operation it had ever conducted, Aggus loaded up into an RG-31 Nyala with the rest of his OMLT team and headed off to find the war. The team also included a medic and a driver/gunner and Aggus' second-in-command, Warrant Officer John McNabb.

McNabb, a former Airborne Regiment soldier who's on his third tour to Afghanistan, seems to have evolved that special talent of learning to endure with great humour whatever calamity or head-shaking misfortune befalls him. In addition though, especially on an operation like this, you just get the sense hanging around McNabb that he knows what he's doing, and, consequently, I never let him get out of my sight for the next two days.

Of course, going out to find the war as Shumps, Aggus and McNabb intended to do is not always easy, especially in Afghanistan, where the one thing you can always count on is that things won't go as planned, and, further to that, the particular way in which things go sideways always seems surprising, if not malicious.

The operation's first stop was to clear the village of Regay, which had been assessed to have some kind of connection to the potential bad guys in the Nakhonay area. As the convoy pulled out, McNabb slammed shut the Nyala's door and looked only slightly mystified to see the large and long steel door latch swinging freely in his hand. The latch had snapped off and McNabb now found himself holding several kilograms of very important, but now useless metal.





PHOTO: ADAM DAY

The OMLT Nyala sits broken down in the desert.

McNabb shook his head and then looked around a bit, as if maybe to make sure no one was playing a joke on him. “No f–king way,” said the medic sitting across from McNabb, looking in amazement at the now floppy door. “That is unreal.”

In short order, McNabb had found a way to extend his leg and jam his foot against a small lock, holding the door shut but quite likely putting himself in extreme discomfort, given that he was locked into his seat by a tightly cinched five-point harness. He didn’t say a word. He just shook his head and looked like he might be waiting for whatever would go wrong next.

He didn’t have to wait long. First the radios wouldn’t work, then a couple of ANA vehicles got stuck in a wadi, then we began hearing early reports that the large Canadian force we were supposed to meet near Regay was already massively delayed with navigational issues several kilometres to our east and was currently sending tracked vehicles churning through mud walls in search of a way out. The radio was calling out for the deployment of the Canadian specialists in charge of compensating Afghan farmers after their property is damaged by NATO.

Meanwhile, the Nyala’s door kept flying open as we careened over the deeply rutted dirt roads.

McNabb just shook his head grimly.

“I learned a new saying from a soldier the other day,” I said to him.

He looked at me and lifted his chin a millimetre or less, a clear sign he wanted to hear it.

It was a harsh saying, the kind of thing soldiers say to describe the never-ending brokenness of life at war.

“F–kery knows no bounds,” I told him.

He smiled fractionally, clearly highly amused. Then he paused to think. “The Afghans have a saying like that too,” he said quietly. “It’s called ‘inshallah.’”

Keep in mind, this was only about 30 minutes into the operation, well within site of the Sperwan Ghar base we had just left. Friction. That’s what they call it, the guys who specialize in making plans. It means that in a complex event like Op Ateesh Bazi, a lot of little things are going to constantly go wrong, and so you have to build a robust plan that can handle contingencies and not get totally messed up. On this operation the planners must have been good, because things did not derail despite the heavy friction.

After some hours of delay and logistical shuffling, the large two-company Afghan force made its way to the outskirts of Regay, where it dismounted from its vehicles and prepared to head into the village on foot. Before the patrols shoved off, the soldiers all sat around talking about what the coming days might bring, whether or not the Taliban would fight or lay low. The general consensus was that they’d lay low, but no one was really too sure. “It’s our first time poking at the southwest side of Nakhonay,” said Major Campbell. “We want to define it first, or try to define it.

“If we go in with overwhelming combat power they’re not going to stand and fight. They’re not stupid,” he said, ending the sentence almost like it was a question.





PHOTO: ADAM DAY

A Canadian LAV at dawn on day two of Op Ateesh Bazi.

And with that, the operation officially kicked off as the Afghan soldiers with their Canadian mentors started walking in three long columns towards Regay, the sun already high in the sky, beating down on the craggy mountains in the near distance.

As for Regay, perhaps you've previously read a description of a place in some foreign country that was described as being 'right on the edge of the desert.' Well, Regay is even more on the edge of the desert than that. In this case, it's the Regestan desert, sometimes called the Red desert, for its deep ochre colour and really the village of Regay is late in the process of becoming a part of this desert.

The outskirts of Regay are a series of sand dunes with ruined walls sticking out of them. There are no adults around, but some children run free in the dunes, possibly playing. Inside the town, smaller sand dunes crowd the little alleys between the compounds and many of the ruined buildings look like they were ornately and intricately carved by some strange force from another planet and then bombed by some other force. In general, the place feels like it belongs in a time slightly after the end of the world; or before it, perhaps.

Aggus and Shumps together kind of herd the Afghan soldiers in the right direction. While Shumps seems attentive, he never takes any persistent interest in the map Aggus has, or the tactical plans he speaks about or the navigational advice he gives, and instead seems content to roll with the punches, whatever punches may come.

The patrol moves right into the middle of the town and sets up on a sand dune out in the open. The other Afghan company can be seen in the distance, circling the outskirts of Regay and heading towards us. "7-1 Alpha," Aggus says into his radio. "First company has cleared objective Little Mountain and gone firm at grid 31256. Over."

Aggus drops to the ground, keen to conserve energy in the blistering heat. "This is wicked," he says sarcastically. "It's still three hours until the hottest part of the day—it's going to be a f—king scorcher."

Shumps is unconvinced that he wants to hold up his patrol here, however. And with his company spread all out in small groups hundreds of metres in every direction, his brief hesitation is enough to cause confusion, as many of them kept walking, apparently unaware we had reached our objective.

The interpreter tells Aggus that Shumps wants to move the company up into the tree line some 500 metres ahead, where some of the other Afghan soldiers are already waiting, and apparently asking for his company to move up. "I know they're waiting," replies Aggus, instantly, "but we can't go. We can't go until we get in touch with the Kandak commander and he tells us what he wants us to do."

The interpreter relays this to Shumps who seems to consider it for a moment before indifferently gazing off towards the tree line. From his perspective, the constant Canadian need to chart and check positions and clear all movements with the chain of command probably seemed pretty tedious. The tree line was no doubt a better position than sitting out in the open, as we were now, so it must have seemed odd to him that the Canadians would hold this position simply because it was the position chosen on the map days earlier.

The interpreter, a young Afghan from the north, probably did not speak English much better than Shumps did. Despite this, he was taking a very great risk to be here, as interpreters, unlike ANA soldiers, are widely reviled by many Afghans. Moments

was taking a very great risk to be here, as interpreters, unlike ANA soldiers, are widely reviled by many Afghans. Moments before, the interpreter was bragging that not even his own mother knows what he does for a living.

Shumps and the interpreter talk for a few seconds and then the interpreter tells Aggus that the Kandak commander's radio is broken and Shumps can't reach him. Aggus sighs and calls it in himself, already knowing the answer that will come back. "The call sign here is intending to move forward to the copse of woods at the edge of objective Big Mountain," he says into the radio to Major Campbell, "and I just want to confirm that that is OK with the Kandak commander, because the call sign here does not have communications with him. Over."

The garbled reply comes back quickly. Aggus looks up and relays the message to Shumps via the interpreter. "So we're going to stay here until the other company is into the village and then we can move up to the tree line."



PHOTO: ADAM DAY

Just after dawn, the force prepares to move out.

In an effort to draw some lesson from the little exchange, Aggus adds: "If 2nd Company tells you to come and join them in the village, you should tell them that's not the plan, and they don't have the right to tell you that, and that you're going to take your orders from your commanding officer."

Shumps momentarily looks at the ground, and then the sky, in much the same way a small boy would if his dad tried to correct his behaviour: he's listening, maybe, but not too happy about it. In any event, Shumps eventually did get his way and the whole patrol moved up into the trees and promptly sat down for a long break.

Relaxing in the sand, Aggus and McNabb listened on the radio as the tankers from Lord Strathcona's Horse grumbled back and forth about getting their Leopard tanks unstuck and finding their way through the nightmarishly complex terrain of Panjwai. There was occasional sympathetic laughter from Aggus and McNabb.

Meanwhile, about the only friction in Regay came in a most leisurely way, as the patrol had parked itself in the shade, awaiting pickup. "Do I have time to brew up?" McNabb asked Aggus.

"Probably," replied Aggus.

But sure enough, as soon as McNabb had put his meatloaf and gravy ration in the heater bag the vehicles appeared on the horizon, charging in our direction to pick us up. "This is bullshit," McNabb snarled mockingly. "You said we had time."

"Well, it's war, you take your chances," Aggus replied, chuckling gently as he watched McNabb stuff his still smoking ration bag into his backpack.

It doesn't take long for real bad luck to catch up to McNabb though, as halfway through the road move to meet up with the Strathcona tankers, our Nyala has some sort of epileptic fit in the now-scorching desert sand. No matter what the driver did, the Nyala would no longer make forward progress. The entire crew unloads and from the outside it appears that somehow the brakes have seized. Every time the driver hits the gas the Nyala hops up and down vertically in the sand, belching black smoke, looking like some dying petrol-age animal.

Aggus and McNabb spend much of the afternoon kind of looking forlornly at their Nyala, calling every once in a while for assistance, which eventually comes in the form of a Strathcona recovery vehicle which disgorges an already harried and sand-blasted tank mechanic who, after hearing the symptoms of the Nyala's failure, readily admits that while he cannot fix our problem, neither can he pull us out.

McNabb just shakes his head.

Nevertheless, the tank mechanic asks Aggus to start up the Nyala so he can see the problem.

Predictably, the Nyala starts up and drives off almost as if it was never damaged.

McNabb just shakes his head.

It must have been the heat, is the general conclusion as we pile back into the Nyala, eager to catch up with everybody for the day's concluding live-fire gun range exercise. As Major Campbell says, "it's always good to know if your gun is going to work."



PHOTO: ADAM DAY

OMLT Major Mark Campbell (right) briefs his soldiers.

During target practice Shumps' company's heavy weapons, 12.7-mm and 14.5-mm machine-guns mounted in the back of Ford Ranger pickup trucks, misfire and jam so fatally that of the four brought up to the firing line only one ever gets off any rounds and those somehow manage to miss the entire mountain and instead go sailing off towards Pakistan. The Canadian tanks, meanwhile, blast the mountain most impressively, shearing off huge chunks of rock in a noisy display of power that couldn't really be lost on anyone for many miles around.

With the shooting over, the entire convoy—now several kilometres long and larger than ever—mounted up and roared off around the mountain, heading for a campsite near Nakhonay.

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The big question, of course, is why Nakhonay and its environs were allowed to go so long without a significant coalition presence.

Only about 10 kilometres as the crow flies from a major Canadian base, it's hard to see how allowing the development of an 'insurgent stronghold' could be in the best interest of stability in Kandahar province. "We haven't been there to clear the place, and hold the place and so that is something we're looking at," said Brigadier-General Guy Laroche, back at Kandahar Airfield, shortly after the conclusion of Ateesh Bazi.

While some Canadian officers like to claim it's a sign of NATO success that the enemy is no longer standing and fighting, no longer engaging in any sort of conventional tactics, there are no easy answers to what would happen if a Canadian convoy drove directly into Nakhonay. While chances are quite high there would be a large conventional fight, it does remain to be seen. "We went there to see if there was enemy there," said Laroche. "We don't know if in fact there are many bad guys in the region, and the thing is there was no direct engagement."

In the end, the critical factor is manpower. Generating the forces for Ateesh Bazi was no easy feat and required almost a month of planning. In order to accomplish the basic aims of counter-insurgency strategy in Panjwai district alone—to clear an area of insurgents, hold it, and then build on it—would clearly require more troops.

While troops may be in short supply generally, at least for a few weeks in April at Kandahar Airfield there was reason for optimism because the United States Marines had arrived in strength and they came fully armed and ready to fight

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PHOTO: ADAM DAY

A 1st Company soldier with his rigged-up weapon.

The 24th Marine Expeditionary Unit is a fully self-contained fighting force of nearly 3,000 jarheads and they came packing as many high-calibre weapons as they could possibly bring with them—it's hard not to feel pity for the enemy when gazing upon the seemingly endless rows of Marine armour and fighter jets and attack helicopters.

Indeed, there is no aura quite like that of large groups of young, battle-hardened U.S. Marines hanging around the airfield in groups, bored, waiting for the commanders to clear the red tape and unleash them into war. (Although by the time you read this, they have well and truly gotten into the fight, having deployed west to help the British in Helmand province.)

These Marines are the only people I've ever met for whom dying in action, I suspect, would actually be considered a good time. Or at least, it would be more fun than hanging around KAF for two months, which is what they had been doing so far.

It must be said, KAF is not a nice place to spend your life. All the basic requirements are there, but it is a joyless existence, close enough to home to remind you of how much you miss it, but not close enough to keep you happy.

Of course, the all-you-can-drink espresso bar does take the edge off. But even still, you have to have patience to stand and press the button repeatedly in order to get a full cup, not to mention an iron will to endure the hostile stares of the chronically under-caffeinated European soldiers behind you, waiting for you to get out of their way.

But, even at KAF, well, the hostilities intrude on the air-conditioned malaise. Even at KAF, it cannot be put any more delicately, you could explode at any second, as rockets fall from the sky with distracting regularity. And when you are aware a rocket could land on you at any moment, life takes on a different feel. It's a subtle switch, a small click somewhere in the brain. You go, very gently, from living normally to merely hoping you'll survive. In order to endure in this new mode, it seems like you have to give up a little bit, to give yourself up to fate or chance or inshallah or whatever you feel like calling it. And not even the all-you-can-eat soft ice cream can help you much with that reality, especially after seven, eight or nine months, which is what many of the Canadian headquarters staff now serve.

However, the big threat of death is not a rocket to the head, Canadian soldiers are reassured in their welcoming theatre brief, it is instead the kind of arterial bleeding of the type that occurs, when, say, your legs are blown off.

As a result, most of the soldiers have very impressive skills with a kind of high-tech military tourniquet that you winch up to effectively clamp the limb off. While the tourniquet stops the bleeding in most cases, the chances of keeping the limb are not what you'd call stellar. But sometimes not even the tourniquet works, which is when the nuclear-grade option—quick clot—is called for. This is a kind of chemical that you sprinkle over the area of the wound as if it were kitty litter and which sears everything shut so hard that moderate burns regularly occur to the person who applies the clotting agent, never mind the poor person being clotted. The agent is so powerful that it can't really be used on anything but limbs, as it's been known to eat through organs entirely.

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And this is just the information in the welcoming brief.

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PHOTO: ADAM DAY

Captain Matt Aggus (left) and Lieut. Matiullah (Shumps) discuss their route through Adamzai.

Meanwhile, out near Nakhonay on day two of Operation Ateesh Bazi, the sun was creeping above the horizon at just past 0500 hours and everybody was slowly coming to life, no one having succumbed during the night to any vipers or scorpions or spiders or Taliban.

The plan was to drive to a position roughly in the centre of all the villages and then set up the tanks and Canadian vehicles there to provide fire support while the Afghans and OMLT cleared the villages essentially compound by compound.

After the entire convoy arrived at the central battle position it became necessary to readjust everything and so for a short time anyone in the villages could have watched this fearsome array of firepower driving in circles, literally, across their fields. “There’s no way they’re going to fight us now,” McNabb noted. “They’re going to think we’re all f–king crazy.”

“If we don’t have a plan, there’s no way the enemy can second guess us,” another soldier chimes in merrily.

“He who plans first, plans twice,” says a third.

Eventually though, everything gets sorted out and all the OMLTs muster up for their final briefing. “All right, if there are no final questions, let’s have a f–king good one,” says Major Campbell to the assembled OMLT groups. “Take it slow and steady, it’s not a f–king sprint it’s a marathon: we’re going about six, seven kilometres today if we end up doing all the f–king objectives. And for those who haven’t been in contact yet remember, it’s for f–king real so you only get one chance — don’t f–k it up. All right, let’s go.”

On the outskirts of the first village, Aggus holds up the patrol to tell Shumps that a report has just come over the radio that insurgents are planting IEDs in the village ahead of us. Helicopters roar overhead.

Shumps is unmoved. He asks a villager walking by with a donkey if there are any bad guys in the village. The villager reportedly says no. Shumps is still acting like he’s going to a bakery. He keeps glancing around like he’s looking for a bus to catch. It’s kind of disconcerting

of uncoordinating.

Aggus uses this brief pause to try to convince Shumps that he needs to be far enough forward that he can influence the direction the lead elements of the patrol will take through the village.

While Shumps eventually does as Aggus advises, it doesn't turn out to be quite enough. The scheme of manoeuvre for patrol through the villages, while not complicated, was tricky enough to cause problems.

The two ANA companies were to parallel each other in a staggered formation, with one company leading, then holding firm while the other company overtakes it before itself going firm. In this way they would leapfrog the whole way through the three villages.

But as the two ANA companies enter Adamzai, the first village, they begin to overlap each other, essentially swarming into the village.

On the ground, watching the ANA soldiers moving in essentially every direction at once, it's plain to see that if the enemy started shooting now, the best bet would be to hit the dirt and hold on because bullets would quite likely be flying in every direction.

It didn't take long for Major Campbell to catch up to Aggus and Shumps. "The geometry of fire is all f-ked up," said Campbell, indicating that one company would have to move ahead while the second company held here.

As the operation slowly sorted itself, the navigational issues that started the problem proved very difficult to resolve. While the lead elements of the Shumps' company were only maybe 50 metres ahead of the map-toting command group, it was enough of a gap to cause ceaseless confusion.



PHOTO: ADAM DAY
Warrant Officer John McNabb.

At one point, Shumps grew tired of the continual holdups and decided to lead the patrol himself. Aggus quickly pulled him back.

As the operation went on everybody began to feel the pain of the continuing navigational problems.

One young Afghan soldier who'd spent the day in the lead element walked up beside Aggus after yet another reversal of direction and made to grab the map from him, as if in mockery. "You have to talk to that guy," McNabb thundered at Shumps.

"He is not educated," replied Shumps, his English suddenly quite solid. "He is a crazy soldier. All soldiers are crazy."

McNabb just shook his head.

Patience, says McNabb, is a key thing that working with the ANA has helped him learn. "They certainly taught me patience," he

says. “It’s something I should have learned 10 years ago.”

And McNabb does make sure to patiently watch out for everybody, especially Aggus, who he makes sure is well-hydrated and eating his rations. But he also looks after Shumps, who late in the day becomes increasingly ill in the heat, though he steadfastly refuses medical attention.

While there’s no doubt the heat was the toughest enemy facing the coalition force on Ateesh Bazi, there was also the rather basic military difficulties involved in bridging the two fighting cultures. The Afghan soldiers seem disinterested in our particular way of war—our maps, our plans, our tactics. They have their own system, much more casual, seemingly based on instinct as much as reason. But, as everyone notes, the Afghan culture is steeped in warfare and the men themselves are tremendous fighters, so it’s hard to say their way of war is wrong or inappropriate.

However, it is plain to see that the quiet fatalism epitomized by Shumps’ constant ‘inshallahs’ does have a downside.

For example, one of the soldier’s in Shumps’ company has an AK-47 rifle totally tricked out with cool looking additions like a grenade launcher, butt-stock pad and even a nice looking scope, an enhancement rarely seen as useful on the AK-47, a weapon notoriously inaccurate at the kind of range that makes a scope necessary. In any case, as one of the Canadians says, the scope isn’t meant to be mounted on that rifle and the butt-stock pad is wonky so the whole jury-rigged system kind of looks high speed but “couldn’t hit a barn on a sunny day.”

But for the Afghan carrying the weapon, whether or not he hits his target would probably be more a result of God’s will than any basic technical issue like a well-zeroed sight. Despite this, it’s not the Afghan tactical proficiency that most concerns Aggus. In fact, as Aggus says, the single biggest thing he’s working on with Shumps and the company is not fighting, but sustainment and logistics.

But even there, the Afghan soldiers’ penchant for leaving basic things to chance does grind them down. For example, Shumps and his company knew their electricity generator was going down, but they didn’t submit paperwork to their battalion headquarters to have it repaired or replaced, despite the urgings of their mentors. So it went down and they spent a week without power, complaining to the Canadians all the time.



PHOTO: ADAM DAY

1st Company moves through Khenjakak.

McNabb describes this as the school of hard knocks. And even though it is a tough way to learn, as McNabb notes, it applies to everything they do, even gun maintenance, which was obviously something to worry about given the feeble showing by the ANA heavy weapons the day before. “We tell them to clean the guns. We lead by example,” said McNabb. “But I’ll be f-ked if I’m going to go out there and clean their guns for them.”

Those could be some very hard knocks indeed.

In any case, at the end of a long day of patrolling and with no enemy seen, the convoy’s about to move out again, McNabb gives orders to Shumps: “When we move, you fall in behind us.”

“Inshallah,” comes the reply from Shumps—if God is willing.

McNabb shakes his head, a resigned grin on his face. “I love that shit,” he says. “It’s like when I tell my 16-year-old daughter to do something and she says ‘whatever.’”

Regardless, eventually everyone got formed up, but as the convoy was heading north out of Nakhonay, a tight hard blast rippled down the line of Canadian armour. A Canadian vehicle just up ahead had been blown up. It was another LAV and strangely it was fourth in the order of march, behind two tanks with mine rollers and a tank with a blade dozing the road.

No one was saying how the Improvised Explosive Device (IED) managed to survive the passage of the minesweepers, but the general consensus was that it was probably detonated on command by a nearby Taliban. There were injuries but nothing too serious, although the recovery operation took enough time that darkness fell and the entire convoy now needed to navigate a very tricky route home in the dark using night-vision equipment.

It didn't take long for friction to take over. Hours passed as the convoy lurched first one way and then the other in the dark, trying to stay off the roads and away from the IED threat but getting itself more and more jammed up in the process. It went on and on in the dark. Four, five, six hours. We were unable to find a route and getting bogged down. Enemy movement was spotted in the distance. I couldn't see him, but I knew McNabb would be out there in the dark, quietly shaking his head.



PHOTO: ADAM DAY

Maj. Campbell (left) and Capt. Aggus discuss the final stage of their route.

Certainly the OMLT mission isn't easy. They are essentially doing basic training in a live-fire war zone, and without the authority to actually conduct training. Despite this, Aggus strongly argues that the OMLT system is good and that it will work. And indeed, Ateesh Bazi was a success. It was complicated and tough but the intent of the operation—to gather intelligence on possible enemy in Nakhonay—was completed.

At the very least, no one can ever doubt the bravery of men like Aggus and McNabb and Campbell, out there somewhat beyond the front lines, risking everything to help bring about a more capable Afghan army.

Back in our LAV we got moving again, only to hear a funny report. "I don't think the gun system is working," said the LAV commander over the intercom.

"Why?" was the reply from the LAV's rear air sentry.

"Because it says we're going southwest."

"We are going southwest," the soldier replied.

This was a problem, because the southwest was the direction we'd come from.

Then the inevitable command came over the radio: if we can't get out of here on the next try, we're going to have to form a defensive perimeter here for the night. Everybody groaned, except for the headquarters guys, who spend much of their time on KAF and were seemingly looking forward to the adventure of a night spent in bad-guy territory.

The next day, the radio commander said that the mission was a success. This was a success because the mission was

Then somebody on the radio came up with an idea to give up on the night vision. This made sense, as everybody within 10 kilometres could have heard us and seen the non-night-vision equipped ANA flashing their lights. So the order was passed down, the convoy was switching to white light.

Seconds later, the vehicle intercom filled with gentle, bemused laughter. "It's a giant jugf-k," croaked the rear sentry.

In the darkness everyone had gotten confused and when they turned their lights on the sentry saw a strange sight, the whole convoy was strung out and jumbled, headlights pointing in all crazy directions, hardly two pointing the same way. Everyone, it seemed, had a slightly different idea of how to go about getting us out of the situation we were in.