

Canadian troops launch airborne assault on Taliban command centre

4 hours ago

ZHARI DISTRICT, Afghanistan — Canadian troops struck deep into the heart of Taliban territory this weekend, launching an airborne assault on a suspected insurgent command centre and supply base in the restive Zhari district, the first such operation using Canadian helicopters.

Over 200 Canadian and American soldiers took part in the nearly 11 hour operation Saturday where they swept through mud-walled compounds and thickly fortified grape huts looking for insurgent commanders, weapons caches and bomb-making factories.

The troops withdrew by helicopter after uncovering a large amount of explosive-making material, a few weapons and capturing two suspected Taliban fighters.

The raid, in which there were no casualties, marked the start of a new chapter in the way Canada fights this three-year-old desert war in Kandahar province.

Canadian troops have conducted helicopter assaults before, but until now they've always been ferried into combat by either U.S., British or Dutch helicopters.

The \$292 million addition of six CH-47D Chinook battlefield helicopters, as stipulated in the John Manley report, gives commanders the flexibility to order more of these kinds of raids on insurgent supply lines.

With air transport previously scarce, Canadian soldiers in the past have been forced to conduct these kinds of lightning raids by driving their noisy, lumbering armoured vehicles up the target - a manoeuvre that gave the Taliban plenty of time to know they were coming and prepare defensive positions.

Not so this time.

"We came in hard, we came in fast and we got on to the objective immediately," Lt. Aaron Corey, a platoon commander, with November Company, said as he sat, feet dangling over a dried up irrigation ditch.

"We had total surprise, which no matter how hard we work at night; no matter how hard we try to be sneaky-peeky type guys, we just can't do it; especially in that size. You can move 10 or 12 guys around quietly, you can't move 120 guys around quietly at night."

The raid began shortly after sunrise with three Chinooks - two British and one Canadian - thundering in low and dropping the troops in poppy field where the plants had just started poking through the ground.

As he guided the helicopter to touch down in the spongy ground, the mission commander, Maj. Jonathan Knaul, couldn't help but be struck by the milestone moment.

"This is cool," he thought to himself at the time and told reporters afterward. "This is cool. It is. I'm taking onboard Canadian soldiers and driving them where they have to go."

The soldiers spilled out of the ramp and formed a defensive perimeter and within 90 seconds the three Chinooks of the initial wave were back in the air and pounding out over a field. They banked steeply over a dry riverbed and disappeared.

It wasn't long after a second wave of helicopters came in that Afghan men - individually and sometimes in groups - began to appear on small hillsides and outside compounds. They stood for hours and watched, all-the-while staying well outside of rifle range.

Helicopter gunships, in the form of two modified Canadian CH-146 Griffons, orbited protectively above the area, their door-mounted gatling guns clearly visible from the ground.

At one point, a Griffon pilot spotted two men with plastic jugs digging in a dirt roadway, apparently trying to bury a booby trap ahead of a Canadian platoon. The helicopter dove on the men, apparently scaring them away.

The commanding officer of November Company said the gunships made a "huge difference" and potentially forced the Taliban to keep their heads down.

"So them being above, I really think that kept the insurgents at bay and (the helicopters) were able to paint a very good picture outside of the periphery where we couldn't see," said Maj. Rob McBride.

Ironically, the air force had to fight to convince both the senior military establishment and the federal government to get the Griffons deployed to Afghanistan.

As soldiers and engineers fanned to search compounds, many of the locals kept their distance and those that did have contact with the Canadians seemed petrified to be talking with them.

One villager began shaking as engineers searched his two dried up wells - perfect spots to hide stacks of AK-47 rifles and rocket propelled grenades. Nothing was found in the wells, but his behaviour raised eyebrows among the troops.

Engineers uncovered 204 kilograms of fertilizer and drums of diesel fuel - both ingredients for home-made explosives - in one compound. While in an adjacent mud building detonators were

discovered. Two suspected Taliban fighters were captured.

The raid completed, the troops withdrew to a grape field, using its chest-high berms as cover.

"We'll see the (rocket propelled grenades) come out as we leave," Master Cpl. Scott Vernelli warned as he watched two fighting age males peek around a corner at him.

The withdrawal went smoothly, without an exchange of gunfire.

Capt. Justin Brunelle, the forward air and artillery controller, said the attack was so far behind where they normally expect to fight, the Taliban had likely been left scrambling to find weapons.

The fact there were no casualties was seen by Knaul as a sign that the helicopters had done their job and dealt insurgents a setback.

"The army has got a very tough job here and we don't want them to get hurt on the roads," said Knaul, who added his crews need no reminding everyday that their job is to save lives.

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