

# Two weeks after heavy fighting - village of Sangisar surprisingly quiet

*Bill Graveland, THE CANADIAN PRESS*

SANGISAR, Afghanistan - Just two weeks ago in this tiny village - the birthplace of the Taliban - the sound of machine-gun fire and rockets shattered the air and fiery artillery rained down from the sky leaving huge craters in the dusty earth.

Today there is near silence with only the sounds of the birds singing.

Operation Tashwish Mekawa (No Worries) was meant to send a message to the Taliban. The dusty village, surrounded by walled mud compounds and grape orchards is where the Taliban's supreme leader, Mullah Mohammed Omar, founded the armed movement in 1994.

It was also believed to have been the base from which a number of ongoing attacks on various outposts and police substations have been launched in recent months.

The goal of the mission was to build a strongpoint, essentially a small, heavily fortified base, to bring a level of stability to the region.

The strongpoint is now in place - large gravel filled bags called Heskos and razor-sharp barbed wire surrounding an abandoned village compound.

As for the Taliban - things have been very quiet.

"Since we're here everything is quiet. We found some ammunition points and some weapon points. I am working with the ANA (Afghan National Army) and the ANA guys are really good soldiers," said Lieut. Stephan Tremblay, from Alma, Que.

That doesn't mean the Taliban have left the area, said Tremblay, but it does show they know they are overmatched.

"We had to kick their ass first. As soon as we arrived we had a tank, we had a lot of ANA soldiers, we had a lot of artillery so what I think is we're a lot stronger than them. That's why they put IED's everywhere," he added.

The Canadian military has released video filed by Combat Camera on the battle operation. It shows soldiers getting a pep talk from a bewhiskered Warrant Officer Vincent Morin and then chronicles the two-and-a-half hour firefight with the Taliban.

Morin is still in Sangisar and expects to remain there with his men for about a month.

"It was difficult during the night. It was a long process to come here because of the ground - all the grape fields, the walls we had to go over with all of our kit. But it went well," said Morin, originally from Sherbrooke, Que. "As soon as we arrived we were under contact at least two hours-and-a-half hours during the morning but as soon as the artillery began to go on the ground it became quiet."

And it is still quiet. Morin expected the new base would be under attack for at least a week after the area was captured but it didn't happen.

"I thought one of their leaders had died when we took the place," he said. "Fortunately with the ANA the public has great confidence in them and I thought that was the major difference."

At least 35 Taliban were confirmed killed in the battle. Two Canadian soldiers, Cpl. Nicolas Beauchamp and Pte. Michel Levesque died when their Light Armoured Vehicle drove over an IED. An Afghan interpreter also died and three Canadian soldiers were wounded.

The Afghan National Army, along with a handful of Canadian mentors will keep the peace in the area as they have a few kilometres north at Howz-e Madad.

The lack of fight from the Taliban so far is a bit of a concern and a little bit of a worry for Lieut. Tremblay. He had expected things to be different.

"I'm really surprised. I thought it was supposed to be harder than that but it's never finished," he admitted. "We have to be here and make sure nothing happens. We are here, we are in a strongpoint and we have to be strong in the strongpoint all the time."

The belief is that with Afghan soldiers running the show in the area, there will be a level of trust built with the local population, who are essential in providing intelligence on where the Taliban are located and where they might strike next.

So far, so good, said Tremblay.

"I think yes, they are glad to see us because our ANA commander is receiving a lot of information and they are happy to see us here and with us here life is a lot better," said Tremblay but he said there is a lot of work ahead.

"We are very far away. We are the last place on a long line of bases," he said. "There is nothing after, no Canadians. We are the first of the front line and right now it is working."

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