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Operation SANGA FIST: Canadian infantry and helicopters execute first air-mobile mission

By Captain Dean Menard and Captain Krzysztof Stachura

Kandahar Airfield, Afghanistan — At 5:00 a.m. on 7 March 2009, when most of the garrison was still in bed, *Operation SANGA FIST* began with last-minute equipment checks for the soldiers of November Company, the 3rd Battalion, The Royal Canadian Regiment Battle Group; 2-2 Infantry Battalion of the United States Army; and elements of the Afghan national security forces. Then they boarded the buses taking them to the ramp to catch their flight.

The air was crisp; you could see your breath. The atmosphere was rich with anticipation and excitement.

There was nothing significant about the time of day; N Coy is accustomed to early-morning departures for operations and patrols in their area of operations. The novelty was that they were not going by road.

"The purpose of this operation is to disrupt insurgents in western Zhari," said Lieutenant-Colonel Roger Barrett, the battle group's commanding officer. "The speed and aggressive nature of air-mobile operations will give us a significant advantage in the conduct of this operation."

The buses entered the loading area and rolled up to a row of three Chinook helicopters — two British, and one Canadian. Air-mobile operations are routine for the British Chinooks, but this was the first time a Canadian helicopter flown by a Canadian crew would take Canadian soldiers into battle. By taking the air-mobile approach, this operation placed the attack directly in an area where the insurgents would feel safe.

Flying in formation — the Canadian Chinook escorted by armed CH-146 Griffon tactical helicopters — the transport helicopters quickly inserted the troops on their objective, which they immediately seized. The soldiers then spent the day meticulously exploiting the ground, finding a variety of weapons, ammunition, and components for improvised explosive devices.

Back at Kandahar Airfield, as the troops disembarked from the return flight, the officer commanding N Coy, Major Rob McBride, said, "We had to stay focused on our task at hand. The Chinooks allow us to get to our objective faster, safer, and with a huge element of surprise in our favour."

"The operation was very successful," Maj McBride went on. "The transport capability allowed my soldiers to reduce the amount we travel on roads, thus reducing our risk of land-mines and IEDs. We are able to get in quick, accomplish our task, and get back out."

The first of its kind in Afghanistan, *Operation SANGA FIST* provided a CH-147 Chinook transport helicopter escorted by CH-146 Griffons to transport Canadian-led soldiers. "This is the first of many missions we will be conducting in conjunction with the battle group and our allies here," said Colonel Christopher Coates, commander of the Joint Task Force Afghanistan Air Wing. "We were really fortunate to be doing this operation with our own Canadian troops, contributing to security and stability, and helping to accelerate governance here in the Kandahar Province."

"This operation is a huge milestone for the Air Force," said Major Jonathan Knaul, the aircraft commander and pilot of the CH-147 Chinook that took part. "To be able to participate in an operation like this and provide our soldiers and coalition partners with this kind of rapid mobility is an excellent accomplishment for us all."

Operation SANGA FIST is only the first of many air-mobile missions, and both the helicopter crews and the soldiers are eager to do it all again. Combined with soldiers'



Soldiers from November Company, 3rd Battalion, The Royal Canadian Regiment Battle Group disembark from a CH-147 Chinook helicopter at the conclusion of *Operation SANGA FIST*



Anticipation runs high as soldiers from the 3rd Battalion, The Royal Canadian Regiment Battle Group prepare to board the Chinook helicopters that will fly them deep into Zhari District for *Operation SANGA FIST*, a one-day air-mobile deliberate operation.

determination, this new capability is sure to keep the insurgents guessing.

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