



*The sun setting on a Coyote in full surveillance mode.
Photographed during Operation ONYA, this vehicle was providing overwatch
of the SALAVAT area and the UN Road between Panjwai District HQ and OP CLIFF.*

THE FINAL TOURS

AFGHANISTAN – 2009-2010



1ST BATTALION PRINCESS PATRICIA'S CANADIAN LIGHT INFANTRY BATTLE GROUP ¹

The next Dragoon squadron to see service overseas was 'B' (Major Mark Popov and Master Warrant Officer Kevin Mathers). They arrived in Afghanistan to relieve 'B' Squadron 12^e Régiment blindé du Canada in September 2009 and stayed until May 2010.

The squadron's pre-deployment work-up training began in August 2008, almost a year in advance. Interestingly, the first meeting of the leadership of the battle group took place in Calgary's Museum of the Regiments where a ceremony was being held to commemorate the Patricia's Afghan fallen from previous tours. Training and exercises in southern Alberta (Suffield), and northern Alberta (Wainwright) prepared the soldiers for what was to come. Much of this training was conducted with sub-units of the 1st Battalion Princess Patricia's Canadian Light Infantry, the unit around which the battle group would be structured.

Following their arrival in theatre, the usual period of time was passed at Kandahar Airfield (KAF). This permitted the soldiers to become acclimatized, get briefed on local conditions and to zero their personal weapons. As one soldier pointed out, a great deal of time was passed by the new arrivals in trying to figure out exactly what time it was back home! All the Dragoons made a stop at the Tim Horton's coffee stand which employed Mr. Sean Wilson, brother of the Regiment's Trooper Mark Andrew Wilson, who was killed in action on 7 October 2006, immediately after Operation MEDUSA. The link between the Tim Horton's outlet and the Regiment was so strong that it appeared in the memoirs of a Strathcona Leopard tank driver:

*Squadron Commander
Major Mark Popov (right)
and his Sergeant Major,
MWO Kevin Mathers (left).*





"We are not going anywhere until my boys have their Timmies."

"I remember hearing an apocryphal but most likely true story about a recce troop from the Royal Canadian Dragoons who were pulled out of the field to perform a VIP escort task out of KAF. As their convoy was rolling towards the exit of the base they suddenly pulled in beside the Tim Hortons for a quick coffee break. When the senior Afghan government official they were escorting began to impatiently remonstrate at the delay, the RCD Troop Leader bluntly replied, "We're not going anywhere until my boys have had their Timmies!"²

'B' Squadron moved to the field primarily by Chinook helicopter on 15 October 2009. They landed at Strong Point Echo in the Dand district. Here, the squadron was on its own and found itself interacting on a daily basis with Afghans or 'local nationals' in military-speak. Veterans of previous tours were struck by this and commented that they had seen more Afghans in one month during this tour than they had seen in all of their previous tour!

Mr. Sean Wilson from Tim Hortons and B Squadron soldiers, April 2010.



Mounted and dismounted patrolling took up most of the time. Many of these patrols involved making contact with village elders. It frequently resulted in an invitation to take tea in the elder's home. The squadron, with its attached engineer section, was in effect the overlord of the Dand district. Although they only numbered 140 soldiers in total, they had responsibility for the entire area.

The problems with getting timely replacements into theatre had been addressed. This tour, thankfully, had no fatal casualties. The one injured soldier who was repatriated to Canada was replaced within a week; a process that had previously taken a month. Of course, it would have been far more efficient and effective if those replacement soldiers had already been serving in theatre but that would have meant exceeding the numbers allocated by the manning slate.

A new and significant problem was the state of the Coyotes. The same vehicle fleet was used in Afghanistan throughout the entire war (2003-2010) and they were getting tired. In particular, the fine Afghan dust penetrated the engine intakes, causing loss of power. On the plus side, both battle damage and normal wear and tear were now routinely repaired in just hours. The dedicated vehicle maintainers had finally been allocated full operational stocks of replacement parts; but the vehicles were getting old and worn out.³ They were also getting fewer in numbers and those Coyotes that were knocked out by mine strikes were replaced with LAV (light armoured vehicle) III variants.

During 'B' Squadron's deployment, a Coyote Mast vehicle, commanded by Master Corporal Black, suffered a catastrophic engine fire which rendered it 'beyond local repair'. However, a group of National Support Element mechanics, working on their own time, resurrected the "burn victim", rewired it, fabricated parts by hand and used parts recovered from the myriad of other damaged Coyotes. By the end of the deployment, this vehicle, no longer with a mast, but still a functioning Coyote, was returned to service.⁴

Another sign of the changing times was the large number of reservists being deployed. Roughly 10% of the squadron came from such regiments as the Queen's York Rangers (RCAC), the Ontario Regiment (RCAC), The First Hussars (RCAC) and



B Squadron moving from KAF to Strong Point Echo by Chinook.



B Squadron Coyotes and tanks on patrol together in the Panjwai District.

the Windsor Regiment (RCAC). Some entire crews were composed of reservists. Although most had started their attachments to the RCD employed as surveillance operators, by tour's end some were filling crew commander positions.⁵ For the most part, the reservists were mature, well-motivated individuals who worked hard and integrated well.

Indeed, the reservists had worked out so well that at tour's end, they were all interviewed and offered a component transfer (a transfer to the regular force).⁶ The presence of the reservists, although beneficial

to all, was a symptom of the stress that the continuous deployments were causing to the Army and the Regiment. The earliest tours had no shortage of people eager to go. The later tours, not so much. People were going back for the second and third time, which placed pressures on family life and impacted the Regiment's ability to train and exercise at home.

The squadron was heavily involved in patrolling, both mounted and on foot. The idea was to have frequent, regular, friendly interactions with the Afghans. This was called Operation HANDSHAKE and frequently involved taking photos of the locals as well as social interactions like saying hello, taking tea, or attending local gatherings called Shuras. The Afghan interpreters were, of course, an integral part of these activities.

One innovation introduced by the enemy was the hoax or fake IED (improvised explosive device). A reconnaissance patrol would spot an IED, report it and picket the site. The engineers would soon arrive, escorted by another reconnaissance patrol. The engineers (as often as not navy divers with explosives training) photographed the device and then usually blew it in place. But more and more often, the reported IED lacked an explosive charge. Or it would be just made up to look like an IED but only consist of pieces of junk. After several of these encounters, it became apparent that the enemy was observing the Canadians' tactics. They were noting the Canadians' routes, response times and standard operating procedures.

When an Afghan National Police patrol was blown up in a mine strike, the Canadians noted that the location was one that they had previously responded to that had been a 'fake' IED location.⁷

In January 2010, 'A' squadron took over the Dand district. This entailed establishing the Operational Coordination Centre District – Dand. It was a clearing house for information and projects throughout the district. The centre set priorities, avoided conflicts, and monitored progress. The development priorities for the area were: security, education, economic development, infrastructure development and women's issues. These issues involved increasing involvement with the local provincial reconstruction team and other Canadian government agencies.

The officer who was given responsibility for setting up and running the Dand District Centre was the squadron's battle captain, Captain Enno Kerckhoff. This meant that the squadron's liaison officer, Captain Tim Abbott, had to take over Kerckhoff's previous duties. In April 2010, just before their departure, 'A' squadron handed over the Dand District to an American unit (1st Squadron, 71st Cavalry Regiment from Fort Drum New York). The American unit had over 500 personnel, to relieve approximately 100 Canadians. This encounter created such a positive impression on both parties that a mutual friendship was created that endures to this day.

1st Troop (Captain Chris Hillier) was placed under command of the Strathcona's 'B' Squadron

The final B Sqn Gun Camp May 2010. The same Coyote fleet had served the Dragoons well for 12 years but they were worn and battle scarred with virtually every one of them damaged at some point or another.

