

Robin Thibault's story

2005 and 2006 – Technical assistance visits regarding Psychological Operations



*ISAF PSYOP offices at Kandahar Air Field.
Photo provided by Robin Thibault*

Authors' note

The principal authors of this text, aside from the individual recounting the story, are John Cochrane, a former member of the unit, and his niece Marina Tinkler, a Concordia University student. This record of events was prepared in 2015, many years after they occurred. The authors prepared this record principally using information obtained during interviews with the individuals involved. Where possible, this information was corroborated through interviews with others and a review of pictures and other publicly available information. The record presents the events as the individuals involved remember them several years after they occurred.

Robin Thibault's story

Background

In 2005, Captain Robin Thibault, CD was employed as a Psychological Operations officer at the Peace Support Training Centre (PSTC) in Kingston, Ontario. The PSTC was a joint, inter-agency, and multinational training establishment that prepared selected members of the Canadian Armed Forces, other government departments and foreign military forces for deployment abroad. It focused on individuals who were being deployed for civil-military co-operation, psychological operations, headquarters work, peace support, military observation, or other duties. It also acted as a centre of excellence for certain types of operations, notably Psychological Operations¹ (PSYOPS) and Civil-Military Co-operation (CIMIC). In 2005, PSTC was focused on preparing soldiers for deployment to Afghanistan.

As a member of the Royal Canadian Hussars, Robin had accepted a Class B call-out (full-time temporary employment for a member of the Canadian Armed Forces Reserves in a non-operational capacity) at the PSTC. He had been recruited by the PSTC after serving as a Psychological Operations (PSYOPS) operations officer with NATO's Multi National Task Force North-West (MNTF-NW) in Bosnia in 2004. In Bosnia and Afghanistan, PSYOPS were aimed principally at disseminating information to facilitate the work of the military by impacting the attitudes of the local civilian population.

During his time at the PSTC from early 2005 to January 2007, Robin was deployed to Afghanistan for three separate Technical Assistance Visits (TAVs). The end date of his third visit was set to coincide with his induction into the Royal Canadian Mounted Police.

Information gathering TAV in September 2005

As part of the PSTC's efforts to keep pace with the most recent developments in the operating environment and to deliver the best possible training, PSTC regularly deployed personnel into the theatre to clarify training needs and to capture lessons learned. Robin's first TAV was one such visit.

He went on the TAV with another staff member from PSTC – Captain Bradley Elms (Brad) from the Royal Canadian Regiment, an experienced soldier who had been commissioned from the ranks and had previously served as a sergeant major with the Airborne Regiment in Somalia. Once on the ground, Brad was able to use his extensive network of contacts to facilitate their mission. Brad's focus was to be on the training needs of front-line soldiers and Robin's focus was to be on Psychological Operations (PSYOPS) and Civil-Military Co-operation (CIMIC) teams located in the field and at headquarters.

The TAV lasted approximately two weeks including travel time. They travelled from Toronto to Heathrow to Dubai (Camp Mirage) and finally to Kandahar. In 2005, the Canadian contingent was just moving to Kandahar from Camp Julien, where it had previously been located near Kabul. The Canadian contingent had only recently sent its first convoy to Kandahar and its members were excited about this successful venture. At that time, the Taliban insurgents were still not well organised.

Robin arrived at Kandahar Air Field (KAF), where he was greeted by a reception party, loaded on a jingle bus, given a tour of the camp, and taken to a reception and briefing area. During the tour, he remembers seeing construction trailers that contained a PX (military department store), a Burger King, and Pizza Hut. At that time there were several thousand soldiers located at KAF and regular bus lines

had actually been organized to transport staff around the base. He remembers thinking that the layout was impressive and a little surreal.

At the arrival briefing, he remembers being told about fire drills and assembly areas. He was assigned to a sleeping area in a BAT (an acronym for big area tent which the soldiers humorously referred to as “big-ass tents”). The tent was equipped with a large number of camp cots and a concrete floor. It was surrounded by huge concrete blocks for protection. In the tent, they joined elements of the 3rd Battalion of the Royal Canadian Regiment who had recently arrived from Kabul.



*Sleeping quarters in a BAT at KAF in 2005.
Picture provided by Capt. Robin Thibault*



*Capt. Bradley Elms in a BAT at KAF in 2005.
Picture provided by Capt. Robin Thibault*

In the middle of the first night, Robin awoke and when his eyes opened, he saw that Brad, who was sleeping in the next bunk, was also awake and looking right at him. Seconds later they heard a large explosion. People in the tent started moving. Robin immediately donned his helmet and tried to remember if the earlier briefing had given instructions regarding a rocket attack. He saw the RCR soldiers clad in pyjamas and flip-flops running with their rifles out the door. Since Brad was putting on his combat uniform, Robin did also. Someone turned on the lights which lit up the large white tent in the dark night. After some shouting, the lights were extinguished. When Brad finished getting dressed, he looked up at Robin and gave him this unimpressed look and nodded at his helmet. Robin noticed that he was the only person in the BAT wearing his helmet, so he put it away. They waited outside near the concrete walls and after a while all went quiet. Everyone returned to their bunks.

He later learned that the explosion had been caused by an old Russian-era rocket fired by the insurgents from one of two large mountains² located to the north between KAF and the city of Kandahar. The insurgents typically fired these rockets using various crude timing devices such as a water bottle with a hole in it as a timer. When the bottle depleted, the rockets were fired indiscriminately into the camp. Brad explained to Robin that it was the sound of the rocket flying over the BAT that had woken them up before it exploded. In one of the subsequent rotations, the British RAF Regiment became responsible for camp security and put a stop to this type of attack by hunting down and neutralising the rocket teams on those mountains.

The following day the pair started to meet with people at the Canadian headquarters in KAF to gather information. It was decided that Brad would work in KAF and Robin would go to Kabul. Arrangements were made for Robin to travel to Camp Julien in Kabul with the returning convoy. He travelled in a G-Wagon with 2 other soldiers and an interpreter. The convoy, which departed around 8 pm, took about 15 minutes to clear KAF, then headed north on highway 4 to Kandahar City and then turned east on highway 1⁴. At that point, as a passenger in the back of the vehicle, Robin heard some commotion on the radio. The lead convoy vehicle, a Light armoured vehicle (LAV) had been following a slower jingle truck which was not moving over to the side of the road to let the convoy pass even though this had been requested several times by the lead convoy vehicle. Indeed, one of the messages that the PSYOPS units repeatedly communicated to the civilian population was to clear the way for convoys, as the placards on the front and rear convoy vehicles were often insufficient in convincing Afghan drivers to cede the right of way. Finally, the jingle truck moved over towards the shoulder of the road but just as the lead vehicle began to pass it, the jingle truck swerved back towards the centre of the road, brushing the side of the lead convoy vehicle and ripping off everything that was hanging on the side of the military vehicle including a set of dragon teeth, which were used by the troops to block the road at roadblocks.

The dragon teeth fell to the ground and were driven over by numerous vehicles, puncturing approximately 18 tires in the convoy. The convoy commander called a halt to assess the situation. This occurred on the highway near a gas station. The convoy commander decided to block highway 1 to ensure security of the convoy while the tires were being changed, causing a large traffic jam. Robin and the other passengers got out of their vehicle to help with security. Robin remembers thinking that trouble could easily develop as the waiting civilians were becoming impatient and kept approaching the convoy to see what was happening. The translator, using instructions provided to him by one of the soldiers, told the people to return to their vehicles but provided them with no information that might have helped manage their expectations. At one point, the interpreter reported that a troublemaker seemed to be moving through the crowd inciting dissatisfaction. With two other people, Robin also helped move a huge tire onto the vehicle just in front of them, which was the 10-ton wrecker. Once the tires were replaced, the vehicles regrouped at the gas station. Finally the decision was made to return to KAF and reschedule for the following day.

The following day the convoy departed and one of the vehicles requested an emergency stop to resolve a problem at the exact same spot as the prior day. This time the problem was resolved quickly and the convoy proceeded. The convoy took about 6 hours to get to Camp Julien. Camp Julien was the camp for the Canadian contingent stationed near Kabul. It was situated among the country-specific ISAF camps spread out along route 1 near Kabul, across the road from the midway point between the King's and the Queen's palaces. It was also equipped with its own well which produced spring water.

At Camp Julien, Robin was an unexpected visitor who had to explain his presence and his mission. Nevertheless he was able to meet with the CIMIC operations group and interview a number of soldiers, including those responsible for base security. CWO Jeremy Pressnell, a member of the Kabul-based CIMIC operations group, escorted him around the camp and to the American base for a briefing. They also visited the market area, other areas in Kabul, an orphanage for girls financially supported by the local CIMIC liaison team, and the local bazar. The bazar was an area near the camp where locals could bring items to sell to the Canadians. The goods sold at the Bazar included alleged Roman and Greek

coins as well as Afghan war carpets, which are typical Afghan carpets with pictures of military equipment woven in rather than the usual mountains or other types of scenery. During his visit to the Bazar, Robin noted that the Afghans were not as good at negotiating as the Tunisian merchants that he had met when visiting bazars in Tunisia when on leave during his Bosnian tour. During his visit, he also noticed that Camp Julien had become a dry base, so no alcoholic beverages were available except to a group of civilian contractors who had their own mess facilities.



Captain Robin Thibault at Camp Julien in Kabul showing the Queen's palace in the background. Photo provided by Captain Robin Thibault



Picture of one of the vehicles that had run over the dragon's teeth during an ill-fated convoy to Kabul. Photo provided by Captain Robin Thibault

Several days later he returned to KAF by airplane. Upon arriving at KAF, he heard about the first vehicle-borne improvised explosive device (VBIED) attack on Canadian Troops that had occurred while he was in Kabul. At the time, this was a new tactic for the insurgents in this area. It was adopted after they had attempted to fight using more conventional methods and realized that they would not be effective given the superior equipment and firepower of the ISAF. Robin recalled having received a briefing on IEDs when he attended a PSYOPS training course in the USA in June prior to his visit to Afghanistan so he knew that it was a tactic that the Americans had already encountered elsewhere. However, up to that point, it had not been a topic that had been covered in depth during the PSTC briefings delivered to mobilising Canadian soldiers, nor was it a topic that was taught to militia members at the Regiment.

That day, he and Brad interviewed the Provincial Reconstruction team (PRT) at Camp Nathan Smith in the city of Kandahar, where they were able to attend a debriefing session with the personnel from the convoy that had been attacked. He remembers the driver of the jeep giving testimony about the VBIED experience. The attack had occurred between the KAF and Kandahar City along route 4. The attack vehicle had swerved towards the convoy and exploded. The resulting explosion had melted all the plastic parts on the lead convoy vehicle and set the observer's helmet on fire. The damage to the convoy was limited because the explosives were in the back of the attack vehicle and the force of the blast had been blocked, mostly by the motor.

Returning to KAF that night, Robin and Brad travelled with the convoy that had been attacked. Robin remembered the security team being very nervous as they anticipated another attack. At that point,

Brad mentioned that he wanted to create more awareness about VBIEDs in the briefings provided by the PSTC.

Preparations to build PSYOPS capabilities in Kandahar

Upon his return to the PSTC in Kingston, Ontario, Canada, Robin was assigned to several projects to help build the PSYOPS capabilities of the Canadian contingent operating in Kandahar. At that time, ISAF had a PSYOPS capability, but the Canadian contingent did not.

The main idea was to build capabilities similar to those that the Canadians, British and Dutch had built collectively during the Bosnian deployment. The idea was mentored by Brigadier General (BGen) Stuart Beare, who was then the commander of Land Force Doctrine and Training System, which included the PSTC. BGen Beare had previously seen the benefits of this type of operation when he had been the commander of NATO's North-West multi-national task force in Bosnia. Robin had been a PSYOPS operations officer for that same task force. BGen Stuart Beare had promised to Major General David Fraser, the then ISAF commander of Multinational Brigade for Regional Command South, to use the PSTC to help establish radio broadcast and printing capabilities in the theatre. Robin was initially asked to focus on the print capability and support both initiatives.

Robin prepared a plan which included a printing facility in KAF and an identical training facility in Kingston. The KAF print shop was to be built using prefabricated stackable container-sized building blocks. The working areas were to be located on the ground floor and the residential quarters were to be located on the second floor. The equipment was to be provided by Heidelberg Canada, a subsidiary of a German manufacturer. The idea was to quickly provide custom-made pamphlets, posters and leaflets to the frontline soldiers who could distribute them to the local population. This portion of the plan was never realized given the stiff resistance from key staff officers on the ground in Kandahar, who believed that the printed media would not be effective because they believed that a high proportion of Afghans could not read, and that the logistical requirements could not be met by the already-strained resupply system.

Royal Canadian Hussars History documentation project
 Individual and group experiences of RCH members during the Afghanistan deployment
 during the period from 2006 to 2011



*Printing equipment at PSTC of the type that was planned to be deployed to KAF.
 Photo provided by Captain Robin Thibault*



*Document preparation equipment of the type that was planned to be deployed to KAF.
 Photo provided by Captain Robin Thibault*

Concurrently, Robin also helped organise the broadcast facility in the form of an FM radio station – called Rana FM. *Rana* means ‘light’ in the local Pashto language. To help with the creation of the radio station, the PSTC hired a consultant named David Bailey, a former British army captain who had been employed as the station manager of the NATO North-West task force’s FM radio station in Bosnia. He had an eccentric personality as evidenced by the colorful socks that he often wore but he was a hardworking effective individual. Since the NATO task force’s Bosnian station was closing down, David was available to help with Rana FM. Robin helped him organise his move to Canada and meet the immigration requirements.



*Radio station logo.
 Photo provided by Captain Robin Thibault*



*Radio Station studio located at PSTC.
 Photo provided by Captain Robin Thibault*

In April 2006, Robin, Brad and CWO Jaimie Mackenzie, who later became the assistant manager for the radio station, performed another tactical assistance visit (TAV) to Kandahar. This second visit was very different than the first visit. Four Canadians soldiers had recently been killed. On their way to Kandahar,

the PSTC team attended the coffin unloading ceremony at Camp Mirage. The four deceased soldiers had been travelling in a convoy with several other vehicles. When the convoy passed through a ravine, their vehicle was hit by an IED.

After this somber entrance into theatre, the PSTC team was greeted at KAF by a Captain from Land Force Doctrine and Training system (LFDTs). They were informed that the insurgents had become very strong in PSYOPS and intimidation. During this TAV, Robin and Jamie were not allowed off the base because they had not undergone the newly-required pre-deployment training. They stayed 7 days and liaised with the engineers to see where and how they could install the print building and the radio station.

Upon their return to Canada, Robin was put in charge of the implementation aspects of both the print and the radio projects. The print project was subsequently cancelled and Robin was asked to focus all of his attention on the implementation of the radio station transmitters in Kandahar. A decision had been made to build the studio and production room in Kingston and to transmit the feed to Kandahar by satellite. Using this approach, the studio and production facility would subsequently be available for other potential operations elsewhere in the world. Although pro-military, the radio station was to be a cool station in order to attract the attention of the younger generation, a demographic group that was targeted as being more receptive to new ideas. The young Pashton locals loved Bollywood music, so that type of music was to make up the bulk of the content. In addition, however, some messages aimed at softening attitudes and promoting cooperation with the Afghan government and the ISAF forces would be included in the programming.

Implementation TAV in Kandahar

From October 2006 to January 2007, Robin returned to KAF with his co-worker Warrant Officer Jamie Mackenzie to implement the Broadcast capability of Rana FM. This being his third visit, he now was familiar with the route. So when he missed his flight connections in London and met several other stranded soldiers, many of them on their first tour to Afghanistan, he guided them for the rest of their journey until their arrival to Camp Mirage.

During the layover at Camp Mirage, he almost had an unfortunate incident with the UAE base guards. During these layovers, Camp Mirage followed the practice of keeping soldiers' passports and giving them a photocopy of the document for local use. While trying to return to the camp from a local outing, Robin realized that he only had a photocopy of his old expired passport from a previous visit and not the photocopy of his new one. A guard who had stopped the bus at a security checkpoint and who inspected the paperwork of all the passengers also noted the problem and refused to let Robin back on the bus to the base. Robin credits the team's interpreter with calming the situation and convincing the guard in Arabic to let him back on the bus.

This was a mentally tough period for the Canadians. Operation Medusa³ was just finishing. The Canadians had recently fought important engagements with the insurgents near Masum Ghar and they had experienced a number of casualties, including some from an unfortunate friendly fire incident. In this context, many of the officers he met at KAF were focussed on priorities that they considered to be more urgent than the implementation of a radio station. Consequently, Robin had to spend a lot of time in KAF and Kabul lobbying for the necessary resources and a radio frequency.

Compared with his tour of duty in Bosnia, Robin found that it was much more difficult to network with the officers in KAF because of the lack of messes and the prohibition of alcohol. In Bosnia, many introductions were made and many problems were solved over a beer at the mess. Notwithstanding the lack of messes and alcohol, there were many other things to do in the camp, notably there was a gym, an internet access facility, a shopping facility, a telephone area, a movie-rental facility, a computer games facility, and a floor hockey rink. The floor hockey rink had been built directly in front of a patio located adjacent to the Tim Horton's trailer allowing people to sit and watch the games. Robin also remembers attending a CBC-sponsored comedian event meant to lift the morale of the troops. Ironically, it occurred on an evening when the airfield was attacked with several rockets. Each time a rocket was fired, the show was interrupted and the audience had to take cover. Without the messes, however, many of the officers just chose to work long hours. Networking and problem solving were still possible – but it took more time and effort.



*Steffen Becker and Robin Thibault on TV Hill in Kabul.
Picture provided by Captain Robin Thibault*



*Kirsty McQuade and Robin Thibault at the PSYOPS
office at KAF.
Picture provided by Captain Robin Thibault*

There were several individuals who believed in the benefits of the PSYOPS project and helped Robin establish the radio station. Captain Steffen Becker, the German officer responsible for the ISAF radio station in Kabul, helped, as did an American Air Force Sergeant, who was also stationed in Kabul and who was the manager of all the frequencies used by the military in Afghanistan. Also, Major Kirsty McQuade, a British PSYOPS officer who had been Robin's superior in Bosnia, helped him integrate into the ISAF PSYOPS chain of command at KAF and provided the PSTC team with office space. The military frequency manager in Kabul eventually obtained a high quality frequency (99.9 FM) from the Afghan government. Robin's initial reaction was very positive as this was a frequency that was used in Montreal by a radio station that was referred to as "THE BUZZ" which was very popular among young people. However, when the Afghan translator informed the commander of the Canadian contingent in KAF that the number 99 was potentially offensive to Afghans because it might be associated with the 99 names of Mohammed, Robin was tasked with obtaining a different frequency.

Finally, a deal was made with the ISAF PSYOPS team allowing the Canadian PSYOPS team to use the 88.5 frequency in Kandahar if Radio Rana would in turn broadcast messages for the ISAF as well as for the

Canadian contingent. Up until that time, the ISAF PSYOPS team had used the 88.5 frequency but only in Kabul as it had no broadcast capability in Kandahar.

While Robin was working on gaining access to the frequencies and otherwise preparing the terrain, David Bailey was working back in Kingston to establish the radio station studio and production room. A number of Pashto-speaking Canadian residents were hired to act as radio announcers. The majority of them came from the Greater Toronto Area and were first or second generation immigrants from Afghanistan. The programming was planned and the messages were prepared. The messages were kept very generic. Peace and tolerance were key themes. One message that was to be repeated often was for civilians to clear the road for approaching convoys. Even though the first and last vehicles of each convoys carried placards asking people to do just that, there were frequent incidents when civilians approached too close putting themselves and their passengers in danger.

David, with the help of WO Jamie Mackenzie, also oversaw the preparation and shipment of the re-transmitting equipment that was to be located in Kandahar. In early December 2006, that equipment, which included a satellite receiver, a transceiver and a transmitter in a large protective box, and a generator, arrived at KAF. The equipment was then transported to and installed at the Joint Coordination Centre (JCC) in Kandahar City. The JCC was located in a small compound within the walls of the Kandahar Governor's palace. It was principally occupied by the Canadian contingent's liaison officer, his team and a security detachment (a platoon from the RCR). Contingents of the Afghan National Police and the Afghan National Army were also present at the Governor's palace.

The actual installation of the transmitter was performed by the PSYOPS team and the liaison officer without the assistance of any signallers. Using duct tape, they literally strapped it onto a 20-foot radio antenna on the roof of the JCC. From this location, Rana FM would be able to broadcast throughout the city of Kandahar.

Thereafter, the liaison officer's support team and the PSTC Warrant officer were responsible to keep the generator fuelled and the equipment operating. When the generator was restarted after refuelling, a reset button on the transmitter needed to be pressed to allow broadcasting to resume. Shortly after the commencement of operations, this step was missed on one occasion silencing the broadcasts for three days until a listener sent a text message to the station inquiring as to why it was off the air.

While they were at the JCC installing the equipment, Robin was invited to participate on a short foot patrol with the Canadian Liaison officer. These patrols were often organised at night by the JCC security detachment to provide an example to the Afghanistan forces who sometimes left their posts at night. During this patrol, they visited the nearby camp of one of the militia groups who were loyal to the governor. Upon arrival, the patrol was invited to stop and have tea with the Militia commander and some of his men. Robin found this to be a very interesting experience.



*Foot patrol visits the compound belonging to a militia loyal to the governor.
Photo provided by Captain Robin Thibault*



*Christmas dinner at the JCC in Kandahar City.
Photo provided by Captain Robin Thibault*

After the physical installation was complete, Robin needed to organise a test to ensure the equipment was working. At that time, the Kingston facility was not yet sending a satellite feed. The only feed that was available was one from a CBC station that was broadcasting Christmas music. At first, Robin hesitated using that feed for fear of receiving complaints that the station was broadcasting Christmas music in a Muslim community. However, because it was the only feed available, Robin took a chance and used it to test the equipment by broadcasting for approximately 12 hours. Fortunately there were no complaints, probably because the existence of the new station was not yet known among the population.



*Antenna for Radio Rana on roof of JCC in Kandahar City.
Photo provided by Captain Robin Thibault*

*Container of equipment received and satellite receiver set up in yard of JCC.
Photo provided by Captain Robin Thibault*

In early January, just as Rana FM was about to go live, there was a flurry of media attention. Robin received initial inquiries from the Toronto Star and a Canadian Press journalist. Once the news started to spread in Canada, he was asked to perform numerous interviews, including radio on-air interviews with CTV News and Canada AM and an on-site interview with a visiting TV film crew from Global. While most of the journalists treated the story with positive interest, some of them seemed to want to focus the potentially negative aspects of propaganda. No doubt, they were incorrectly envisaging the use of hard core propaganda that is used by some states to repress or control the population. During these interviews, however, Robin reiterated that the radio station would help promote tolerance among the local population and facilitate the work of the Canadian soldiers on the ground. The messages that were to be disseminated included messages that would help reinforce the legitimacy of the new Afghanistan government, remind people to clear the roads for military convoys, and to report the existence of IED's to the police.

Finally on January 6th, 2007 the radio station started broadcasting on a permanent basis.

Excursion to a Shura and IED attack

With the radio station now in operation, Robin had some extra time on his hands. Around January 10th, he was offered and accepted an invitation from ISAF's tactical PSYOPS team to attend a meeting with local authorities (Shura) that was to be conducted by a US-led team called Task Force Grizzly in a small town near Camp Wilson. Camp Wilson was an outpost located to the west of Kandahar that was manned by Canadian soldiers and the Afghan National Army. It was established as part of a strategy of keeping a permanent presence in areas that had been cleared of insurgents. It was also used to secure the new highway that was being built between the camp and Masum Ghar. A tactical PSYOPS team, unlike a static PSYOPS team, will go out into the villages and consult with the elders, pass out materials and in certain cases broadcast information using loudspeakers. This particular team liked to organise visits to meet town elders in places that had been recently abandoned by the insurgents. Robin participated in the mission as an observer and travelled as a passenger in a Canadian RG-31 Nyala vehicle among a convoy of American Humvees. The convoy left KAF in the middle of the night and proceeded to Camp Wilson using an overland route through the desert. The convoy avoided the city of Kandahar because the ISAF intelligence teams had reported a rumour that a jingle truck loaded with explosives was circulating around the city opportunistically looking to engage a target. The convoy arrived at Camp Wilson where they parked in a secure area, set up camp cots beside their vehicles and settled down for several hours of sleep before proceeding to the town where the Shura was to be held. Robin remembers not getting much sleep because he was not properly prepared for the extreme cold. Although he was generally aware that the desert got cold at night, he was surprised at just how cold it actually got.

He attended the Shura as an observer and took note of events. After the Shura, he was standing on the road near where the Tactical PSYOPS team commander was having a discussion with a local merchant, when he was surrounded by a number of children who seemed to be rather friendly. As an elderly man passed by the group, Robin signalled and expressed the universal Muslim salutation by bringing his hand to his heart and saying *salaam alaikum*, which translates to 'peace onto you'. He was surprised when the elderly man retorted in a snarling voice, saying something that made the children laugh. He was even more surprised when the elderly man proceeded across a small stream that ran down the centre of the road and then dropped his pants, hunched over and defecated right there on the ground in full view

of the group. Robin remembers thinking that if that man was trying to tell him something, he was getting the message loud and clear.

The original plan for the group was to return to KAF taking the bypass route across the open desert. Since the meeting had ended earlier than expected, this plan was changed and the convoy proceeded along the main Soviet-built highway towards Kandahar City. As the convoy passed near the mountains just to the north-west of Kandahar City, it was attacked at the rear by some sort of IED. Robin, who was in the third-to-last vehicle, heard the contact being reported on the radio. He turned to face the rear of the convoy and observed a large cloud of smoke that silhouetted the two Humvees that followed his vehicle. He had the thought that some pictures may be helpful for the subsequent investigation, so he pulled his camera out of his flak vest and took several pictures. Fortunately, the explosion had not resulted in the damage of any vehicle. Unfortunately, the passengers in the last two vehicles, which were Humvees, suffered severe damage to their ears. The passengers in Robin's vehicle, which was an RG-31, were very well protected and did not hear the explosion at all. After an assessment of the damages, the convoy moved on to a secure location. Being simply an observer passenger in the convoy, Robin was not briefed on the details of the attack, on whether or not it was a stationary or vehicle bound IED, or if it had involved the jingle truck that had been mentioned in the reported rumours.



*Small group discussion after the Shura.
Picture provided by Captain Robin Thibault*



*Cloud of smoke caused by IED that exploded near end
of convoy on the way back to KAF.
Picture provided by Captain Robin Thibault*

Transition and departure

In January 2007, as the end of Robin's tour was approaching, his replacement arrived. The TAV tours for the PSTC projects lasted only 3 to 4 months on the ground and consequently both he and the warrant officer responsible for keeping the equipment operating were being rotated out. Robin's replacement was Jeremy Pressnell, the CIMIC operator who he had previously met in Kabul and who was now a commissioned from the ranks (CFR) captain.

Before the incoming team arrived, Robin and WO Mackenzie looked for a means of expanding the broadcast range of the station. With a Master Corporal from the Corps of signals, they visited the Canadian camp at Masum Ghar to see if it would be a good location to place a broadcast tower. The signaller reported that despite its high and secure location, the fact that the camp was on one side of the mountain made it suitable to broadcast only in one direction. After the reconnaissance, they stayed overnight and visited with the Canadian contingent there, listening to many of the stories about operation Medusa and subsequent incidents. From high on the hill, their hosts pointed out many of the locations where the battles had been fought. They also pointed out the other Canadian camps and the road that had been built by the Canadian contingent to link them together. He was also reunited with the translator who several months prior had helped him with his documentation problems and enabled him to return to Camp Mirage. Again, they slept outside in the cold desert air, but this time Robin was comfortable in a snuggpak sleeping bag that he had purchased at the British PX store at KAF. Before leaving the next morning by helicopter, the team was given a short tour of the facility. At the front gate he remembers being impressed with an improvised system used to issue receipts for the cell phones that the Afghans were obliged to leave at the front gate when they entered the camp. The system involved tearing a deck of playing cards in two and issuing one half as a receipt and keeping the other half of the card with the cell phone. Using this system, the telephone that was returned to the individual was the one with the card that exactly matched the other half of the card presented.



*At Masum Ghar, reunion with translator who had helped Robin in Dubai.
Photo provided by Captain Robin Thibault*



*Scouting for possible antenna sites on Masum Ghar.
Photo provided by Captain Robin Thibault*

Prior to the end of this third TAV, Robin returned to Kabul to introduce his replacement – Captain Jeremy Pressnell - and to visit with and thank the people from other national groups that had provided their

precious support to the radio project. He also provided a briefing to the Canadian task force commander and his staff in Kandahar. He summarized the achievements to date and introduced his replacement. Despite the difficulties encountered along the way, he was proud of the achievements of the Peace Support Training Centre's staff and of his own contribution to their collective efforts. He was convinced that the Radio station would help promote tolerance among the younger Afghans and that it would facilitate the work of the ISAF. He thought it might even indirectly help save some Canadian lives. The commander agreed and communicated his wish that the broadcast range be expanded as soon as possible notably to cover the outlying areas where the troops were now operating. Although two mobile antenna had been delivered to KAF, a much larger mast and a more secure site were required to raise the transmitter and broadcast over a larger area. Since Robin was leaving, this task was passed on to his replacement who was now responsible to oversee the installation.

Upon his return to Canada, Robin received the LFDTS commander's coin as a tribute to his service in the theatre.

Shortly after he returned to Canada, and at a date that had been set before he started his third TAV, he was enrolled in the RCMP and commenced his basic police training.

Life thereafter

At the time of the interviews, Robin Thibault was serving as a member of the Royal Canadian Hussars as a captain and as the squadron commander of the reconnaissance squadron. He was also employed on a full-time basis in Montreal as a member of the Royal Canadian Mounted Police where he was part of the task force for Canadian Security. He had left the Regiment when he first joined the RCMP but had opted to return when his civilian employment brought him back to Montreal.

Footnotes

¹According to Wikipedia, Psychological Operations are planned operations to convey selected information and indicators to audiences to influence their emotions, motives, objective reasoning and ultimately the behaviour of governments, organizations, groups and individuals.

²The two mountains located just to the north of KAF were the Zakirgar and Zanirgar mountains.

³According to Wikipedia, Operation Medusa was a Canadian-led offensive fought principally by the 1st Battalion RCR Battle Group and other elements of ISAF supported by the Afghan National Army and elements from the US Special Forces Group (Airborne) and the 87th Infantry Regiment. Its goal was to establish government control over an area of Kandahar Province centered on the town of Panjwayi some 30 kilometres west of Kandahar City. A tactical victory, it resulted in the deaths of 12 Canadian soldiers; five during the major combat operations, five in bombings, and two in a mortar/RPG attack during the reconstruction phase of the operation. Despite suffering a brutal battlefield defeat, the Taliban retained their presence in Kandahar Province and did not lose their will to fight.

⁴Subsequently highway 4 became highway A75 and highway 1 became the Kandahar Ghazni Highway.