

# Ballot Recovery and Election Support in Zabol Province

CPT Tyler G. Matthews



*An ANA Soldier guards ballot boxes from Shamulzai District and the surrounding areas following the Afghan presidential election in April 2014.*

Photo courtesy of author

In February 2014, I deployed in support of Operation Enduring Freedom (OEF) as a rifle platoon leader in Chosen Company, 2nd Battalion, 12th Infantry Regiment, which was assigned to Combined Task Force (CTF) Lethal. Our company and the majority of our battalion deployed to Forward Operating Base (FOB) Apache in Zabol Province near Qalat. FOB Apache was among the largest FOBs in southern Afghanistan, and in 2014 our battalion served as the primary U.S. presence in Zabol, a province slightly larger than the state of Connecticut. Our task force's mission was to support Afghan National Security Force (ANSF) efforts to deny the enemies of Afghanistan (such as the Taliban) safe haven in Zabol. In April 2014, my platoon helped host nation forces and civilian election officials facilitate the Afghan national elections by providing security and logistical support in one of Zabol's peripheral districts. The election support mission taught me valuable lessons about planning for nonstandard operations under tight timelines, integrating tactically in a controlled manner with partnered forces, and using innovative techniques to mitigate risk and ensure mission success during politically sensitive operations.

During the first three months of the deployment, my platoon participated in a wide array of missions. We supported Afghan National Army (ANA) efforts to clear the Taliban from villages in the province's many contested valleys, conducted joint air assault operations with Afghan soldiers and police to build ANSF air assault competency and interdict Taliban, and — more frequently — served as a security force (SECFOR) element for senior U.S. military officers and officials as they advised and assisted the ANA and police in locations across Zabol.

The Afghan national presidential election served as a critical, high-visibility test of the progress and capability of the U.S.-led coalition and ANSF across Afghanistan at every echelon. A successful national election would facilitate a legitimate peaceful transition of power between democratically elected governments for the first time in Afghanistan's history; an unsuccessful election would cast doubt on Afghanistan's government institutions and its security forces.

The elections, which were set for 5 April, offered the ANSF that chance to secure its people while they exercised their democratic right to vote for their next leader. All across the country, Afghans would go to the polls and vote. In most places, Afghans would secure the ballots, consolidate them locally, and then drive them to Kabul.

In Zabul Province, the task was not so simple. The Taliban threat and the terrain constraints in Zabul were so great that the government officials did not have the confidence to drive their ballots to the provincial headquarters. They requested CTF Lethal's help, and our commander obliged. As a result, my platoon was assigned a mission in support of the election effort: to secure International Election Committee (IEC) officials and sensitive election materials (SEM) in Shamulzai District to facilitate the success of the national electoral process in Zabul. Simply put, we were to fly to Shamulzai to pick up the civilian election officials and the ballots cast by the local Afghan population to ensure the safety of the officials and the secure delivery of the ballots to Afghan-held FOB Eagle. Following our mission, the Afghan and election officials would drive the ballots from FOB Eagle to the nearby provincial headquarters in the Qalat District Center, where they would be consolidated and accounted for in the larger national vote tally.

Our SEM recovery mission was a component of the final phase of the task force's larger election operation. Phase one, conducted prior to the election, entailed the delivery of IEC officials and the sensitive election materials to the province's outlying districts, where ANSF could not reliably travel without coalition support. Phase two of the operation was the election window itself, a period of time during which leaders of the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) in Kabul severely restricted U.S. forces' freedom of maneuver through the implementation of a "limited operations window." Generally speaking, this meant that U.S. forces were unable to leave the U.S. FOBs during the 72 hours surrounding election day. Phase three was the SEM recovery and consolidation phase, during which U.S. forces were to return to the same outlying districts, collect the officials and the election materials, and return to FOB Eagle.

The prevalence of social media and the ease with which data can be captured and shared through mobile devices put additional pressure on the entire operation. Our platoon's mission — and others like it across the country — was a tactical-level assignment with potential strategic implications. For the election to be seen as legitimate in the eyes of the local population and the international community, it was paramount that the event occurred with little to no ISAF assistance. Afghan and ISAF leadership were clear that the operation would be Afghan focused, Afghan led, and Afghan secured. If the Taliban or other enemies of the Afghan government were able to portray undue or excessive U.S. influence in the election process, the election itself was at risk of being viewed as illegitimate.

The guidance from our battalion commander was clear: no American Soldier would touch the ballot boxes. U.S. Soldiers should not be pictured moving or assisting with the moving of the materials. Generally, task force personnel were there as security escorts only; the lower the profile of support, the better. These circumstances presented my platoon with a unique problem that we had not had to face in our prior operations: how to account for, secure, and transport election officials and sensitive election materials while maintaining an appropriate distance. More specifically, we planned and rehearsed how to avoid being perceived as overly involved in the process while simultaneously performing a critical support service in the form of security and transportation.



***Just outside of the ANA compound at Shamulzai, 2-12 IN Soldiers work with an interpreter to confirm the number of IEC officials and ballot boxes waiting to be transported.***

*Photo courtesy of author*

The operational environment in Zabul further complicated the planning considerations surrounding the mission. When our battalion replaced CTF Duke in February in Zabul, we replaced a brigade-sized element. The most significant tradeoff we faced as a result of the lack of manpower was the inability to regularly project U.S. presence in partnership with the Afghan forces throughout the province, particularly in the outlying districts. Our lack of presence required us to rely on Afghan reporting for intelligence updates and the enemy situation template (SITEMP). While the reporting was steady, it was often unreliable. As a result, we were uncertain as to how active the enemy might be in the vicinity of Shamulzai immediately following elections, and we were relatively unfamiliar with the district's terrain.

By all friendly accounts, the elections on 5 April were a resounding success in Zabul. Afghan voters turned out in droves, the ANSF secured the voting centers, and the few enemy attempts to disrupt the voting in the major population centers were contained. After the election hours ended, ballots in Qalat and Shah Joy — Zabul's main cities — were easy to consolidate in the provincial capital. All that was left was to collect the ballots from the outlying districts, such as Shamulzai. Earlier in the day, ANSF in Shamulzai reported that the FOB there had received direct and indirect fire from Taliban forces. This led us to plan to reinforce the Afghan area defense while on the objective during the SEM mission.

On 6 April at 0630, I received the mission from my company commander to execute the SEM extraction from Shamulzai. While we knew that there was a possibility that our platoon would be assigned the mission, at the time we believed the odds were unlikely. Higher headquarters had stressed the importance of the Afghan air force — specifically the Kandahar Air Wing (KAW) — taking ownership of the high-visibility mission. Further, we expected the collection to occur on the 7 or 8 April rather than immediately following the election. However, due to environmental factors and our battalion commander's intent to quickly collect the SEM before the enemy had a chance to plan a coordinated attack to recover from its

poor showing on election day, the recovery mission was set for the evening of 6 April, and division tasked CTF Lethal with its accomplishment.

Three platoons from the battalion — two from Chosen Company and the battalion scout platoon — were tasked with collecting the SEM and election officials from three of Zabul's outlying districts. My platoon was tasked with Shamulzai District. Because of the relatively higher likelihood of direct contact, our company commander and fire support NCO traveled as attachments with our platoon. The mission was to leave FOB Eagle at 1550, move to Shamulzai via helicopter, link up with the local ANA officials, spend approximately five hours on the objective organizing the personnel and consolidating the election material, and then return with the ballots to FOB Eagle by 2300.

After receiving the mission, I conducted a time analysis to decide when and to whom to deliver the mission order. We were to go "wheels up" by 1550, allowing approximately eight hours to move through the basic troop leading procedures. I was able to give my platoon sergeant the basic mission details and then a warning order to him and squad leaders by 0745. A handful of us had been to Shamulzai's landing zone (LZ) prior to the election. Otherwise, the rest of my platoon was completely unfamiliar with the site.

My platoon sergeant and squad leaders were understandably unexcited about the mission. They did not need reminding that Shamulzai had been the enemy's most active district on election day as the Taliban had reportedly engaged with small arms fire and mortar attacks to attempt to disrupt the voting. Further, the 1550 wheels up meant landing on the Shamulzai LZ in daylight, giving the enemy's observers the opportunity to observe our movement and easily determine our composition. Worse still, Zabul had been the site of multiple downed aircraft in the preceding months. We were especially concerned with the threat of rocket-propelled grenades (RPGs). The threat would require us to develop our defense and ensure that our available assets assisted in setting the conditions prior to the landing of both the UH-60s and the CH-47s.

Following the warning order, my platoon sergeant immediately went to work resourcing the various special needs for the nature of the mission. Colored chem-lights and infrared stickers were among the unique resource needs. We planned to use colored chem-lights hung around the election officials' necks to organize the officials into chinks. We recognized the tactical risk that colored chem-lights would present; however, we accepted the risk as necessary to ensure we had full accountability and did not inadvertently leave any election officials in Shamulzai. My platoon sergeant worked to secure round infrared stickers the size and shape of salad plates that the Afghans could stick to the ballot boxes for accountability. That way, after darkness, we could visually inspect the boxes as they moved toward the Chinooks.

The planning for the extraction required me to coordinate with the battalion's government affairs officer to ascertain exactly how many officials and exactly which materials we were to move. He gave me the numbers of boxes and officials which had been delivered prior to the election. Furthermore, he alerted me that he had informed the local officials in Shamulzai of our plan to recover the SEM that afternoon. This was significant since it essentially removed a degree of the element of surprise from our mission. We had experienced difficulty on the deployment with ensuring our Afghan partners maintained operations security (OPSEC). Chances are, we assumed, word would spread quickly throughout the district that the Americans were coming soon with helicopters. It was one of many catch-22s: our Afghan partners needed advance warning of when we were coming, but providing that information increased our tactical risk of being compromised and ambushed upon arrival. As a solution, our government affairs officer gave limited information to our partners, such as an approximate arrival time as opposed to a full itinerary of the flights.

During our terrain analysis, we realized that the terrain surrounding FOB Shamulzai — where we would link up and seek to consolidate the officials and SEM — posed challenges for our temporary defensive posture. Less than one kilometer to the west of the base was the town of Shamulzai, marked by several small structures and orchards that would provide the enemy with significant cover and concealment. To the north was a ridge, approximately 1.5 kilometers away, and to the east was a vast open area with good fields of fire. With little effort, the enemy could creep to within the effective ranges of his RPGs and machine guns. We determined that we would need to task our close combat attack (CCA) support to observe beyond the intervisibility line to the north and to report any significant activity in the village if observed.

We task-organized our platoon down to the team level. Two M240B machine gun teams would assist the Afghan defense by posting in opposite corners of the compound with sectors toward our most likely enemy avenues of approach. Special teams were designated to assist with full body searches of the election officials and serve as security for our company commander, who would spend much of the mission engaging the ANA. My platoon sergeant and weapons squad leader shared the responsibility for maintaining security both inside and outside of the perimeter while my second squad leader, two of my most culturally adept Soldiers, and my linguist would focus on the task of securing and organizing the officials and the election materials. Finally, my platoon sergeant assigned the chinks for the CH-47 extraction of the officials, the SEM, and our platoon. Each chink had to have a minimum of five of my Soldiers aboard for force protection and control, which created a plan for a phased withdrawal of our defense off of the objective.

Following my mission order to the squad leaders, we took advantage of the few hours that we had to rehearse our infiltration on UH-60s, our exfiltration on the CH-47s by chink, and our actions on the objective. Specifically, we rehearsed the SEM-specific tasks: how to handle cell-phone cameras and pictures and how to avoid handling election materials. Each Soldier understood the battalion commander's intent: whatever happens, do not touch the election materials. After our final rehearsals, we moved to the flight line.

As planned, we went wheels up at 1550 in two Blackhawks. I spent the 30-minute ride preparing mentally for the next several hours. We would have five hours to find and consolidate the election materials and the IEC officials before three Chinooks would come pick us up. It was not a dream itinerary. Five hours was plenty of time for local Taliban in the area to prepare, approach, and emplace for a high-profile ambush. The 30-minute flight went by fast. Before I knew it, we were on the ground in a pile, and our Blackhawks moved quickly up, away, and out of sight.

The pilots did an excellent job placing us near an entrance to the compound. We quickly established link-up and moved inside to assist the Afghans with their defense. As was often the case, our arrival prompted the ANA to generally displace from many of their security positions, most likely due to their correct assumption that we would add to their security.

When we entered the compound, we were surrounded by beaming faces. I felt like a party guest; there was a palpable sense of joy that the Afghans had just pulled off a historic feat — a mostly safe election day. While my commander respectfully toasted the peaceful results of the election day with chai, I prepared a staging area for the election materials and the IEC officials, and my platoon sergeant emplaced security.

The importance of our platoon interpreter's role in the mission cannot be overstated. I kept my interpreter, Nomi, in arm's reach throughout the mission. He was critical to the initial completion of link-up with the ANA and the local officials. During the first 30 minutes at the FOB, I set out to determine the situation. With Nomi's help, I learned from the ANA leadership that the election officials were

approximately 1.5 kilometers away in a different compound. A miscommunication in the conversation between the government affairs officer and the local leadership had resulted in the SEM and officials staging at an alternate location. As a result, the ANA had to coordinate for the IEC officials and their materials to be moved to our current position, where the aircraft would later return. The choice to have the officials and SEM moved to our location rather than moving to the other compound was one based on hasty mission analysis after developing the local situation. We had occupied and reinforced the ANA compound. Our area defense was strong and emplaced. It was, therefore, an instinctive decision to request that all materials and personnel that needed to be transported back to FOB Eagle would be consolidated at our location. With Nomi's help and a sense of urgency, we told the officials and their police escorts by phone that they needed to be staged as soon as possible to gain accountability and plan for extraction.

I gave them the guidance through Nomi at approximately 1615. We anticipated darkness setting in at approximately 1830, and we agreed that we needed to be tightly organized before dark to mitigate the risk of misplacing materials or losing accountability of the officials. Within 30 minutes of my initial guidance, the police had delivered the officials and the election materials to the landing zone, just outside of the compound. We were pleased to see that the materials looked to be well marked and sealed. Our next task became organizing the personnel and equipment for the Chinooks that would return later in the evening.

While my platoon sergeant maintained security on the compound's perimeter, I worked with Nomi and my squad of riflemen to prepare the extraction of the Shamulzai ballots (without getting within 10 feet of the boxes of ballots themselves). Between 1645 and 1845, we needed to accomplish several critical steps: determine how many boxes of ballots the officials had collected, separate the boxes of ballots from the boxes of election materials, and mark each ballot box with an infrared sticker so that we could see the boxes moving in the dark as they made their way to the Chinooks. Two hours provided ample time to perform each of these tasks thoroughly; however, we wanted to work efficiently in case enemy contact or a change in flight itineraries required the exfiltration timeline to change.

Using our interpreter, I identified motivated IEC officials who would be willing to assist with organizing the heavy-lifting portion of the operation. The first test was to move the boxes inside the compound. Because of the lack of information we shared about our time on objective, the IEC officials and ANA understandably assumed that the Chinooks would arrive sooner than later. As a result, they initially placed the boxes and materials on the LZ itself. However, the timeline was more extended. The dedicated aircraft were performing similar insertions and extractions in Shinkai and Daychopan districts, which meant that there would be several hours before they would return to Shamulzai. In hindsight, this buffer of time was useful because it allowed margin for error for the types of issues that we had already encountered such as miscommunications on pickup sites. Because we were still more than two hours away from the Chinooks' arrival, we organized the movement of the materials inside the compound to provide cover and concealment during the interim period. By doing this, we increased our protection and rehearsed the coordinated movement of the materials.

Inside the compound, we made hasty manifests for each of the three Chinooks. We gave half of the election officials blue glow sticks and the other half red glow sticks. The glow stick was to hang around each official's neck and to be activated on our command. The rule was simple: no glow stick, no trip back to Qalat. Once each manifest was complete, my squad leaders led respectful searches of each IEC official. Five of my Soldiers would be the escorts for the ballots and officials on each of the first two Chinooks. The third Chinook would pick up our leadership and machine-gun teams. By 1900, the materials were organized. We waited in our security positions for almost two hours — quietly pulling security on the

perimeters while inside the compound we passed the time by trading congratulatory phrases about the election's success, the Taliban's demise, and the optimism for a brighter Afghan future.

Our aircraft began to arrive to initiate our extraction at 2055. First, two Apaches arrived and visually cleared our predetermined named areas of interest (NAIs) beyond the intervisibility line and in the orchards surrounding the compound. After the area was confirmed clear, at about 2110, we heard the first of our Chinooks approaching.

The first Chinook picked up the first half of the IEC officials and non-sensitive election materials (such as collapsible voting booths) and hastily left the LZ. I used our interpreter to shout directions and control the movement of the chalk while squad leaders hastily ordered the Afghans to board. Poised and calm in the quiet daylight, the election officials looked scared, nervous, and anxious as the roar of the rotors and the haze of the dust fueled the urgency of the moment. Once full, the Chinook lifted off. One down, two to go.

The second Chinook was the main effort. As it approached, we staged the IEC officials and their boxes in an orderly line on the compound side of the LZ. Again, the simplicity of the staging plan and the precision and redundancy of the interpreter's instructions enabled the Afghan election officials to become an efficient assembly line that moved the boxes of ballots onto the helicopter with relative ease. Through our night-vision devices, we assisted with controlling personnel and watched as the ballot boxes, marked with the IR stickers, moved in a line like ants onto the Chinook. It looked a lot different than election day in the U.S., but this was Afghan democracy in action, and even through the night vision, it was a beautiful sight. Once full, bird two took off. Two down.

The last extract was the smoothest of the three. As we had rehearsed and executed earlier that morning, our security collapsed in a phased withdrawal from the various towers surrounding the compound in time to file up the Chinook's open ramp and into our seats. As we withdrew, Afghan Soldiers re-assumed the security positions and provided overwatch for our exit. In the end, we did not gain contact with the enemy; there were no RPGs to dodge or small arms fire to repel — just three helicopters full of Soldiers, election officials, and ballots to show for our efforts in one of the most remote districts of Zabul.

The final phase of the operation was predominantly Afghan led. In terms of command and control, I ensured that one of my platoon's mature squad leaders was on each of the Chinooks escorting the materials back to FOB Eagle. He visually counted the ballot boxes and officials onto the Chinook at FOB Shamulzai and off the helicopter at FOB Eagle. The first two Chinooks, full of IEC officials, landed on the FOB Eagle LZ at approximately 2145. The battalion's government affairs officer was there with IEC officials to receive and visually inventory the SEM as they emerged from the aircraft. Once the SEM was off of the Chinooks and the officials were secured by the police, our platoon's mission was complete. The Afghan police then escorted the officials and election materials into the Qalat District Center, where they would be consolidated with the votes from the remaining districts in Zabul.

### **Lessons Learned**

I learned several lessons from my platoon's mission in support of the Afghan national elections in Zabul. Most importantly, I learned the importance of training Soldiers and leaders to fully appreciate the sensitive nature of election support missions as a subset of stability operations. In the counterinsurgency environment, perception is reality in the eyes of the local population and the international audience. Leaders must act like everything is being recorded, photographed, and shared. Every facial expression, gesture, and physical act can be manipulated to support a narrative. Soldiers need to train on what this means in practice. A technique I recommend is for leaders to take pictures and video of their Soldiers training for the counterinsurgency environment by interacting with role players simulating local officials or civilians. Showing those photos and replaying the videos to the Soldiers and presenting a negative

message when applicable can add to Soldiers' self awareness at every level, and it will prepare them better for missions such as mine, where a point of failure would have been an ill-timed photograph that could have changed the perception of the U.S. involvement in the election.

Secondly, flexibility is paramount in planning for election support operations. Simple techniques, such as the use of chem-lights to control chinks and IR stickers to identify ballot boxes in the dark, enabled the success of our mission. Such techniques are not in field manuals. Instead, leaders are likely to come to these types of innovative solutions by framing the problems clearly, considering their assets, and prioritizing simplicity in the planning process.

Third, whenever possible, leaders should include host-nation forces in the pre-mission rehearsal process. I was pleasantly surprised when the loading of the Chinooks in Shamulzai went as smoothly as it did. After all, we had not rehearsed corralling IEC officials and their precious cargo at our training center rotation. However, by using the hours available on the ground while waiting for extraction to rehearse the movement and transfer of the cargo, we built confidence in the IEC officials and a shared understanding of the plan. This paid dividends when the Chinooks touched down on the LZ, and the noise, darkness, and blowing debris confused the scene.

Lastly, while reflecting on my platoon's support to the Afghan election in 2014, I have come across multiple sources of helpful military doctrine that would have given me a stronger framework from which to approach the tasks we faced. Specifically, Army FM 3-07, *Stability*, identifies "support elections" as a subtask to the overall stability task of government support (pages 1-4). The Army's stability techniques manual (Army Techniques Publication 3-7.5, *Stability Techniques*) goes even further, specifically outlining the phases and requirements of providing election support (pages 5-9). Lastly, U.S. Joint Forces Command has provided a useful manual titled *Handbook for Military Support to Governance, Elections, and Media*, which serves a useful purpose to junior officers preparing for election support operations — albeit its scope and target audience are leaders at the strategic level. Leaders anticipating that their units may play a role in election support would do well to review these sources. However, the greatest lesson that this mission taught me is that the mission requirements involved in supporting election support — whether through logistics, security, or otherwise — fully require flexibility and adaptability at every echelon within a task force.

Recognizing the importance of integrity and legitimacy in the electoral process and the ease with which an adversary could use modern social media to influence international perception allowed our platoon to utilize the techniques necessary to provide effective support to our Afghan partners while maintaining a low profile.

At the time this article was written, **CPT Tyler Matthews** was a student at the Maneuver Captains Career Course. He is currently a platoon trainer at Officer Candidate School, Fort Benning, Ga. He previously served for 19 months as a rifle platoon leader in 2-12 Infantry Regiment, 4th Brigade Combat Team, 4th Infantry Division, during which time he deployed twice to Afghanistan. He holds degrees from the U.S. Military Academy at West Point, N.Y., and the University of Oxford in England.