

OPERATION AL HASN

Planning and Executing a Full-Spectrum Operation in the Afghan Theater Today

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OVERVIEW

In 2005, members of a Special Operations task force conducted an offensive operation in the Tagab Valley located in the southeastern corner of the Kapisa Province in central Afghanistan. This assault sent insurgent fighters into nearby Pakistan to escape the coalition offensive. Once the coalition troops stabilized the security situation in the Tagab Valley, they shifted to other parts of the theater leaving the valley undefended. By the fall of 2006, insurgent Taliban fighters had returned to the Tagab Valley from Pakistan and had firmly regained control. The Tagab Valley was as deadly in September 2006 as it was before the 2005 offensive. Local leaders reported to coalition forces that there were almost 500 Taliban fighters living in the area, some of whom had trained at one of the three nearby suicide bomber training facilities. Tagab Valley residents symbolically burned humanitarian assistance (HA) drops of blankets and winter clothing in the southern portion of the valley only weeks before the cold winter months. Taliban fighters littered the Kohi Safi Mountains which separate the Tagab Valley from Bagram Airfield with weapons caches and fighting positions to fire on coalition forces (CF). Up until this past November, coalition ground convoys could not pass through the valley without receiving small arms fire as part of a series of pre-planned ambushes. The Tagab Valley, running 40 kilometers north to south only 60 miles northeast of Kabul, was an ideal safe haven from which Taliban commanders could project suicide bombers and other insurgent activity into nearby Bagram, Jalalabad, Kabul, and Kapisa (See Figure 1). Clearly, a stable and peaceful Tagab would have significant effects on the security of central Afghanistan.

Special Operations Task Force 33 (SOTF-33) from the 3rd Battalion, 3rd Special Forces Group (Airborne), worked hand-in-hand with the Kapisa Provincial Governor and soldiers from the United Arab Emirates (UAE) Special Operations Task Force 8 (TF-8) to bring long-term stability to the Tagab Valley. On October 31, 2006, these partners began Operation Al Hasn (Arabic for “fortress” or “castle”) as a joint, multinational, multi-agency operation designed to clear, hold, and build the Tagab Valley against the insurgency. The operation featured more than 1,000 Soldiers and policeman from the Afghan National Security Forces Afghanistan National Police (ANP)/Afghanistan Border Patrol (ABP), TF-8, four Operational Detachments -Alpha (ODAs), Other Government Agencies (OGAs), and Afghanistan National Army

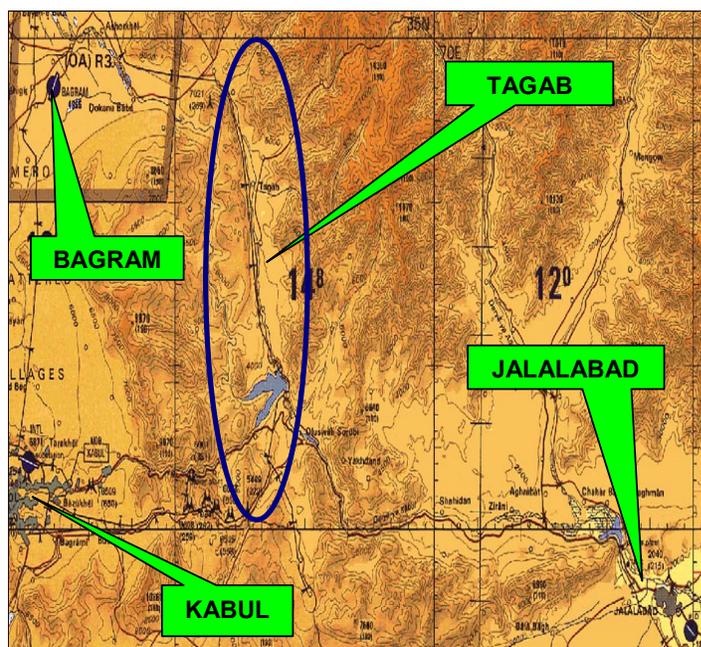


Figure 1

(ANA) personnel, which operated under the command and control of SOTF-33.

PLANNING AS A PARTNERSHIP

“This is the first time that the government of Afghanistan has been involved in all phases of the operation. This is the way that operation(s) should be conducted.”

— **Kapisa Province Governor Satar Murad, November 8, 2006**

SOTF-33, under the command of Lieutenant Colonel Samuel Ashley, rotated into Afghanistan for Operation Enduring Freedom IX. SOTF-33 established a strong partnership with TF-8 whose leader, Lieutenant Colonel Nasser Al Ottabi, was eager to apply his country’s significant assets where they could be most effective in stabilizing Afghanistan. Immediately after SOTF-33 transitioned into Afghanistan, SOTF-33 and TF-8 planners recognized the strategic importance of denying the Taliban Tagab Valley as a safe haven. With this in mind, SOTF-33 and TF-8 began to create a friendly network to degrade the Taliban network

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in the valley. This required the identification of key friendly personalities with whom SOTF-33 and TF-8 could build their alliance. SOTF-33 and TF-8 understood that the key to success for long-term stability in the Kapisa Province was empowering the Afghan officials in the province. With similar Islamic cultural norms and streamlined financial support procedures, TF-8 had the unique ability to build almost instant rapport with local Afghan leaders. LTC Nasser had developed a relationship with the Kapisa Governor Satar Murad and recommended he personally participate in the planning operations to deny Taliban use of the Tagab Valley. In September 2006, LTC Ashley, LTC Nasser, and Governor Murad met at the UAE compound to discuss the future security of the Tagab Valley.

From the first planning sessions, Governor Murad and officials from SOTF-33 and TF-8 agreed that bringing stability to Tagab was not exclusively a military matter. Instead, this was a battle that must be won by the local legitimate government. Long-term success in the Tagab Valley requires tangible demonstrations of the Afghan government's commitment to security and stability in the region. The government of Afghanistan (GOA) would do more than provide symbolic ownership; it would bear the leadership mantle for this operation.

SOTF-33, TF-8, and the regional Afghan leaders began to plan an operation to clear the insurgents from the valley, hold a lasting security posture, and build legitimate government structures capable of combating an insurgent threat over the long-term. SOTF-33 conducted the U.S. military decision-making process (MDMP) to include both Afghan partners and TF-8. This challenged U.S. planners accustomed to tightly structured MDMP. Elements of the planning that might take minutes for a U.S. staff to accomplish, took significantly

longer when working in a combined/interagency environment with partners not accustomed to MDMP. Moreover, the GOA leaders were forced to divide their attentions between operational planning and their governing duties. Despite these challenges, SOTF-33 gave their Afghan partners ownership of the process by pushing the plan forward according to their priorities. The operational principle of having "Afghan ownership" was recently derived from lessons learned in conducting effective operations from the tactical to strategic levels.

When planning Operation Al Hasn, the coalition evaluated the historical operations and looked to three lessons learned in previous Tagab Valley operations. First and foremost, Operation Al Hasn was designed as a true partnership between the U.S., UAE, and the government of Afghanistan. Throughout Operation Al Hasn, SOTF-33 and TF-8 included Governor Murad in the planning, coordination, and execution as an equal partner. Successful counterinsurgency (COIN) operations separate the insurgent from the populace. Today, special operations forces in Afghanistan must empower Afghan governmental agencies to separate the civilians from the insurgents and minimize the impact of those insurgents on the legitimate government organizations. While kinetic operations may be a necessary catalyst for change, it is just as important for non-kinetic operations to be imbedded in these operations to have the lasting effects necessary to win in Afghanistan. SOTF-33 and TF-8 designed the partnership between coalition forces and the government of Afghanistan during Operation Al Hasn to set the conditions for the Kapisa government to separate the local populace from the insurgent fighters.

Second, this mission marked the beginning of a long-term Afghan and coalition government presence in the Tagab

Valley. Temporary displays of military might do not lead to effective growth and transformation in Afghanistan. Long before the kinetic operations have ended, the battle to win the support of the local populace must begin. The Afghan government must provide security and stability through non-kinetic and kinetic operations that have a long term strategic effect. COIN operations require a multitude of aggressive non-kinetic operations that draw on assets provided by Psychological Operations (PSYOPS), Civil Affairs (CA), and Provincial Reconstruction Teams (PRTs). To bolster the legitimacy of the Afghan government in the minds of the Afghan people, the local officials must be seen leading actions that are both relevant to their lives and effective at meeting their needs. Tactical success in the short term holds little value if it does not lead to operational success in the long-term.

Finally, the partnership and the long-term presence must be supported by a responsive and flexible logistics system that are sustainable through an Afghanistan-owned system. Stockpiling all classes of humanitarian assistance and civil-military resources is essential to ensure a seamless transition from kinetic to non-kinetic operations within the valley. CA teams, humanitarian assistance (HA) drops, medical civil affairs programs (MEDCAP), and PSYOPS resources must be pre-positioned for movement prior to the start of the operation. This allows the leaders to move non-kinetic assets throughout the area of operations where and when they were needed, not when they became available.

SHAPING

"If the enemy is to be coerced, you must put him in a situation that is even more unpleasant than the sacrifice you call on him to make. The hardships of the situation must not be merely transient — at least not in appearance. Otherwise, the enemy would not give in, but would wait for things to improve."

— Karl Von Clausewitz

Initial shaping efforts began over six weeks prior to the execution of Operation Al Hasn through extensive and thorough meetings between SOTF-33, TF-8 and the

governor of Kapisa. During these meetings SOTF-33 planners determined that the key location for the forward command and control element should be north of Tagab Valley because it was the most secure location from which to direct Operation Al Hasn and receive accurate intelligence. At the onset of the operation, an ODA from SOTF-33 and a company of the Afghan National Army's 201st Corps would secure a small foothold in the north of Tagab Valley that would later become the permanent firebase for that ODA. SOTF-33 and TF-8 gathered intelligence through the Afghan security organizations in the Tagab Valley region. This location has since become the regional government center in the valley.

Members of the SOTF-33 PSYOPS section prepared products for each stage of the operation. These products included leaflet drops to provide instructions to the local population and military deception plans. Also, radio messages were utilized to provide important information to the local populace during the operation. All of these products helped to support an effective information operations plan that circumvented any attempts by the Taliban to undermine the efforts of the operation. Several days before the operation, Governor Murad recorded messages of assurance, guidance, and leadership for play on local radio stations during the operation to encourage his people to identify the insurgents who have brought instability, poverty and violence to their otherwise peaceful valley. The Voice of Kapisa radio station agreed to play Governor Murad's messages and work with SOTF-33 PSYOPS personnel to ensure the messages were spread throughout its broadcast region. To support the information operations, SOTF-33 PSYOPS distributed several thousand radios to enable the population to listen to Governor Murad's radio messages. The radio transmissions allowed Governor Murad to personally update the people of Tagab with critical and accurate news and information.

Executing these radio programs required the distribution of CMO assets at the right times in the right places. Prepositioned logistics allowed the coalition to provide support to the Afghan leaders when and where they were required, rather than

binding them to a coalition supply timeline. Operation Al-Hasn's logistics, HA, and MEDCAP movements were event driven to provide the command the ability to react to events on the ground. More than 30 days before the operation began, SOTF-33 ordered and requisitioned blankets, sundry kits, radios, food stuffs, and clothing. All classes of logistics were requisitioned, drawn and prepared for movement weeks before the mission began. Days before the operation began, SOTF-33 and TF-8 loaded prepackaged medical and HA supplies on Afghan trucks. SOTF-33 packaged, prepared, stocked, and assembled logistical packages to respond to operational needs in the valley.

By pre-positioning supplies weeks in advance, coalition forces have the ability to support operations without delay. The large MEDCAP package that consisted of more than 30 medical personnel deployed to the Tagab Valley region on the first day of Operation Al Hasn. The SOTF-33 surgeon spent more than a month assembling a robust medical team consisting of personnel from the United States, United Arab Emirates, Afghanistan, Romania, and Korea. SOTF-33 medical personnel provided refresher training for Romanian, Korean, and UAE medical personnel in trauma training in preparation for the medical mission. The SOTF-33 surgeon assembled the MEDCAP to include expanded capabilities for treating women,

children, and a veterinary package for treating pets and livestock. CA planners worked with the ANA to provide both internal and external security and a patient management system that would maximize the number of people who could receive care. As the MEDCAP plan came together, TF Tiger and the Bagram PRT contributed medical supplies and equipment to the already robust package. Medical personnel prepared this package, like the logistical package, to move days in advance, and actually entered the valley only hours after the initial phases of kinetic operations.

Establishing the initial foothold in the valley was made easier by using the "firebase in a box" concept developed by the CJSOTF-A engineer. The SOTF-33 support center delivered relocatable buildings and ready-made defensive resources at the onset of the operation. This along, with CJSOTF-A pre-coordinated contracting with host nation workers, ensured that this firebase was in place within days after the initial assault.

While SOTF-33 and TF-8 assembled the logistics, Governor Murad and his intelligence chiefs identified key enemy locations, key players, and discussing unique environmental and political challenges in the Tagab with the SOTF-33 and TF-8 planners. The local Afghan leadership drove the targeting process with their unique knowledge of the environment. Their unparalleled insight into the region



Courtesy photos

Governor Satar Murad, Lieutenant Colonel Samuel Ashley and Lieutenant Colonel Nasser Al Otabbi discuss aspects of Operation Al Hasn.

gave Operation Al Hasn precise targeting information that would reduce the risk of collateral damage and allow the coalition to maximize the effectiveness of its reconstruction efforts.

In October, SOTF-33 published the warning order and TF-8, ODAs and their partnered Afghan forces began mission-focused training in preparation for the operation. SOTF-33 tasked TF-8 and their partnered ODA to execute an air assault mission to capture key leaders of the Tagab Taliban network. To prepare for this mission, TF-8 and their partnered ODA began a crawl, walk, run training program to execute an air assault against a static target to capture key individuals in the northern part of the valley. They first rehearsed helicopter loading and off-loading procedures and practiced each of their contingency plans. Two nights before the operation, the training culminated in a full fly-away task force rehearsal where the entire assault element loaded onto their helicopters, and flew away to a mock target which they assaulted and secured at full speed.

Other ODAs, tasked by SOTF-33 to create blocking or clearing positions during Al Hasn rehearsed military operations in urban terrain with their Afghan partners. Contingency procedures and movement techniques were polished so that by the 30th of October each element of the kinetic operation had planned and rehearsed key phases of its operations for over three solid weeks.

EXECUTION

“The clever combatant imposes his will on the enemy, but does not allow the enemy’s will to be imposed on him.”

— Sun Tzu

During the initial phase of the operation, ANSF, SOTF-33, and TF-8 planned to isolate and deliberately clear the valley. The first phase would separate the insurgents from the populace. The coalition expected 250 ANP from surrounding provinces to link-up with ODAs to conduct the clearing operations. To SOTF-33’s surprise, the night before the operation, almost 900 ANP responded to Governor Murad’s call by reporting for duty at the governor’s headquarters while others went to the northern part of the valley to collocate next to the ANA/ODA’s location. With this good news and a favorable weather forecast, Governor Murad, LTC Ashley, and LTC Nasser met in the SOTF-33 operations center to monitor and direct the beginning of Operation Al Hasn. With Governor Murad co-located with the military commanders, real-time intelligence from the Kapisa intelligence officers flowed to the ODAs and ANP on the ground almost instantly.

On the first evening of Operation Al Hasn, ANP, ANA, TF-8, ODAs from SOTF-33, and AH-64 Apaches from Task Force Centaur cleared Taliban insurgents from their positions and established a security presence in the valley. The operation coordinated three different key efforts throughout the valley. TF-8 and their ODA partners conducted a successful air assault raid as the main effort against a known Taliban leader in the north of the valley while ANSF and two ODAs sealed the south of the valley (Figure 2).

An ODA, TF-8, FBI, and a dog team commenced the air assault raid just after midnight on October 31, signaling the beginning of the operation. This was the UAE military’s first air assault into a

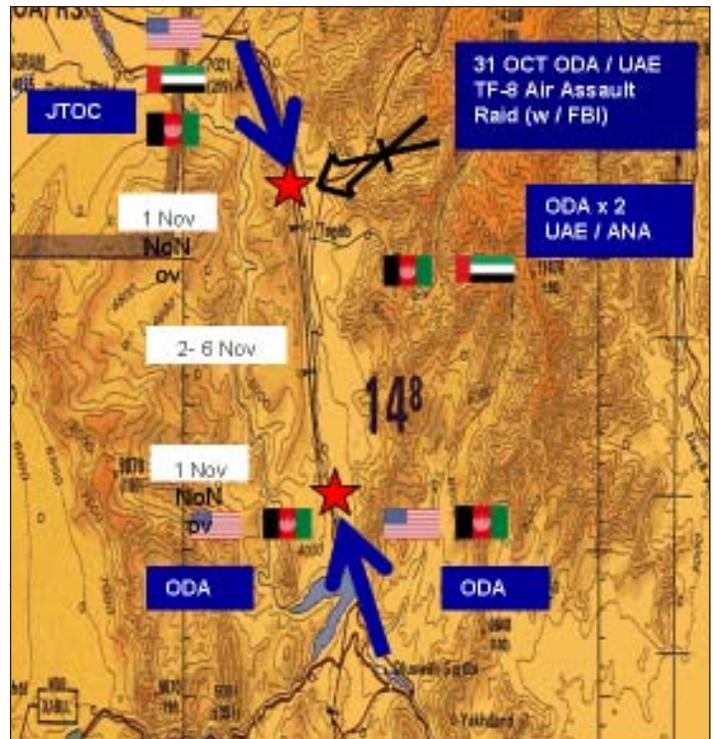


Figure 2

combat situation. Once on target, the element cleared the objective, captured a key Taliban leader, and established strong points. Within 30 minutes of arriving on target, squad-sized elements of Taliban engaged the TF-8 positions. TF-8 suppressed the enemy while the ODA called in AH-64s and AC-130 gunships for close air support (CAS).

As the air assault began, the SOTF-33 support center commander delivered his convoy brief to the massive logistical convoy as it prepared to move from Bagram Airfield towards the Tagab Valley under the cover of darkness. This convoy included not only the HA, MEDCAP and logistics necessary for sustained operations, but also the armored vehicles to be delivered to the air assault element once they had secured their initial objective. A company of ANA and an ODA met the logistical convoy when it arrived at the new Tagab firebase. The ANA, the ODA, and a portion of the logistical convoy moved from the firebase by ground convoy to link-up with the TF-8 air assault element.

On the first morning of the operation, as the Afghan, U.S., and UAE forces began clearing the Taliban insurgents from the valley, LTC Ashley, LTC Nasser, and Governor Murad moved into the northern part of the Tagab Valley and established a forward combined command post. To ensure the operation’s success, Governor Murad stayed at this forward headquarters to plan and direct operations for the entire 11 days of the operation. The governor, co-located with the military commanders, was an essential link with the people of the valley and the Afghan media. When the Taliban insurgents published false information in the press about civilian casualties during kinetic operations, the governor immediately contacted the Afghan Minister of Information, the Minister of Interior, and President Karzai to expose the misinformation. During the operation, Governor Murad



During the operation, Governor Murad presented factual information to the Afghan national media that they published on the same day, which resulted in stopping the Taliban's misinformation campaign.

sent factual information to the Afghan national media that they published on the same day. As a result, the Taliban's misinformation campaign stopped within the first few days of the operation.

Meanwhile, the ABP and two ODAs in the southern part of the valley began fighting their way northward towards the center of the valley and Tagab Village. A-10 Warthogs, B-1 Bombers, AC-130 Gunships, and AH-64 Apaches provided essential close air support as the enemy force increased the intensity of its counterattacks the further the north element moved in the valley. Simultaneously, two ODAs, TF-8 and their partnered ANP pushed south toward Tagab Village.

By the fifth day of operations, on November 4, all of the elements involved in Operation Al Hasn turned east to attack the fiercely defended Bedrab Valley on the eastern wall of the Tagab. TF-8 and their partnered ODA established a blocking position along known Taliban egress and ingress routes in the Bedrab Valley. By dusk, the ANSF and their ODA partners sealed the southern and northern egress routes out of the valley while another ODA established a blocking position on the approach route out of Bedrab Valley in the west.

The coalition partners coordinated the kinetic operation against the Taliban stronghold in the central portion with both Governor Murad's information operations and a comprehensive MEDCAP in the north. More importantly, Governor Murad brought together key mullahs in the valley to encourage them to identify Taliban criminals. After constructive discussion about the future of the valley, the governor sent these mullahs to the center

of Tagab to help the ANP and the ODAs to separate the insurgents from the civilians. The governor then hosted a meeting with Kapisa's parliament members from Kabul to keep them informed on the progress of the battle in the area and received their unbridled support for the operation. Governor Murad followed up this meeting with a local Shura with the local leaders to spread the message of support and encouragement that he had just received from Kabul. Meanwhile, the first of seven MEDCAPs began. Throughout the valley, U.S. medical personnel saw almost 4,200 patients in the first two weeks of the operation. The stacking of HA and medical assets enabled the MEDCAPs to be employed when and where the local population needed them according to the local sentiment. The first MEDCAP in Tagab Village only saw 400 patients. That night the governor decided to plan a second MEDCAP for the following day and announced the new time and place over the new Voice of Kapisa radio station, at local mosques and through the governor's personal contacts. The next day, the

MEDCAP attendance doubled to more than 800. The operational and logistical flexibility given by pre-positioned assets and wide breadth of local influence gained from the Afghan leadership provided the coalition forces the ability to tailor their operations based on the local conditions.

As operations continued, supplying maneuver units became increasingly important. The intensity of the fighting required continuous resupply by either rotary wing or containerized delivery system (CDS). On the second day of the operation, clearing elements participated in decisive direct fire engagements throughout the valley for more than 10 straight hours. As the clearing elements moved closer to the center of the Tagab Valley insurgent resistance intensified. Essential



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ground resupply and aerial resupply drops reached the troops in contact when and where needed. Every night of the first week of operations, Air Force aircraft conducted CDS drops for the maneuver units. In addition, TF Centaur conducted five immediate resupplies of ammunition and water by rotary wing assets.

Throughout the maneuver phase of operations, TF-8 was an invaluable partner in fighting shoulder-to-shoulder with SOTF-33 ODAs. TF-8 soldiers were essential to the main clearing element and in facilitating ground resupply for troops in contact. TF-8's tactics and weapons systems increased fire superiority during the long decisive direct fire engagements. TF-8's soldiers' valiant combat action earned them the right to wear the US Army's revered combat infantryman's badge.

As Coalition forces cleared each area, the kinetic operations flowed seamlessly into stability operations. Local radio stations played prerecorded messages from Governor Murad, encouraging the locals to reject the violent ways of the Taliban criminals and support the coalition forces who have brought security and prosperity to the Tagab. Governor Murad was instrumental in placing the right asset in

the right place at the right time. Every night, Governor Murad conducted a two-hour operations meeting with his key leaders. This meeting followed a format similar to an AAR in which the governor's key leaders discussed what went well, areas to improve, and the essential goals for the next day's operations.

By the seventh day, coalition forces nearly completed the clearing operations in the major population centers, allowing the ANSF, TF-8, and their partnered ODAs to clear secondary portions of the valley and solidify the security posture. The coalition now focused on supporting the local population and bolstering the legitimacy of the local officials. All of the coalition and Afghan elements received actionable intelligence from the local population. Some local residents contacted ODAs to disclose the location of large caches. ANP units received constant reports on the locations of stalwart insurgent commanders who remained in the valley. Sensing a key turning point in the Tagab, Governor Murad took the opportunity to publicly address the local people at the Tagab bazaar. He made an extemporaneous speech that was broadcast by the Voice of Kapisa Radio discussing the evils of the Taliban. The villagers appeared eager to

see a secure and prosperous Tagab with a confident and competent leader.

One week after the kinetic operations began, the homes in the Tagab Valley lit up again as life in the valley began to return to normal. SOTF-33 provided messages to the Voice of Kapisa radio station to be broadcast for 10 minutes every hour of every evening during the operation describing the future of Tagab. No longer anxious about the coalition presence, the people of Tagab became curious about whether this operation was the same as many of the operations in the past; "Are the Americans here to stay?" As the residents asked these questions at MEDCAPs and CA events throughout the valley, SOTF-33 logistics trains built a permanent firebase in the northern part of the Tagab Valley. This firebase serves as the new home for an ODA and a company of ANA soldiers. As coalition forces conducted MEDCAPs throughout the valley, non-kinetic planners made preparations for monthly Tagab Medical Humanitarian Aid Programs. Combined Joint Task Force -76 (CJTF-76) committed millions of dollars in Commander's Emergency Relief Program (CERP) funding specifically to rebuild the Tagab infrastructure. Representatives of United States Agency for International Development (USAID) developed a strategy with the Provincial Reconstruction Team (PRT), the Kapisa government and the coalition to establish long-term infrastructure development projects. To maintain the relationship, SOTF-33 held weekly coordination meetings between Governor Murad, his key leaders, and the Tagab ODA. The people of Tagab now have close allies and security support for the foreseeable future.

EFFECTS ACHIEVED

"I am Taliban, I have been Taliban, but I am not a stupid Taliban. I have seen what the government of Afghanistan is doing for the people and their ways are much better for the people than the Taliban ways are."

**— Local elder Afghanya Shura
November 6, 2006**

During Governor Murad's final day in the Tagab Valley, he held a press conference with all of the national Afghan TV and

radio stations to emphasize the progress in the Tagab Valley. In his statement, he emphasized partnership with the coalition in both security and development. SOTF-33 ODAs are taking the lead in developing the local law enforcement capabilities in the Tagab. A permanent structure is under construction at the new Tagab firebase to facilitate meetings between the coalition and the ANSF. An ANP and National Defense Services (NDS) liaison will be permanently stationed at the firebase to maintain the constant partnership between the Kapisa government and coalition forces. Meanwhile, Tagab officials are encouraging locals to build stores outside of the firebase in which vendors from the local area will be able to sell goods in order to stimulate local economic development and progress.

Less than eight weeks after Operation Al Hasn began, the Tagab Valley is a different place. Counting the number of dead insurgents does not tell the story of the Tagab's transition. The story is best told by the Afghan men, women, and children who returned to the valley and flooded the streets in celebration. Shopkeepers in the main bazaar are replacing doors, repairing walls, and hanging new signs. The local ANP, trained by SOTF-33 ODAs conduct constant patrols to instill a sense of security and stability. Parents dress their children with coalition distributed backpacks and drive around in vehicles openly

displaying pro-Afghanistan stickers throughout the valley. Governor Murad sees an improvement at his level as well. With increased security, a \$3 million CERP-funded road project through the Tagab Valley is expected to be completed on-time. What was a four-hour drive from Bagram Airfield to Tagab now takes little more than 90 minutes.

SOTF-33 and TF-8 now turn their focus towards the development of Tagab's infrastructure and civil society to maintain the momentum and long term strategic effects that SOTF-33 designed Operation Al Hasn to deliver. The primary objective in the Tagab Valley remains the maintenance of stability and strengthening the rapport amongst the local populace to discourage insurgent elements returning in force. Since Operation Al Hasn ended on November 11, there has been little enemy activity in the Tagab Valley and the insurgent related violence in nearby Kabul has been significantly reduced. Operation Al Hasn has become a template for COIN operations in Afghanistan.

During the first night of operations in the SOTF-33 operations center, Lieutenant General Karl Eikenberry, Combined Forces Commander-Afghanistan, said, "This is the best example of full spectrum counterinsurgency operations. This should be the model for COIN operations in Afghanistan."

Success against an insurgency demands that the time, place, and conditions are set in order to establish long-term stability for the legitimate government.



During one of the medical civil affairs program missions in the Tagab Valley, a Soldier meets a few local children.

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