

## **Mid Tour Report**

### **Lieutenant Colonel James Woodham MC, Commanding Officer, The 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion The Royal Anglian Regiment - The Vikings**

As the New Year gets underway I reflect on an extraordinary year for the officers, soldiers and families of the 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion The Royal Anglian Regiment – The Vikings. Having started 2009 planning to deploy to Kosovo and Iraq, the year quickly developed into a period of intense training whilst covering the UK's very high readiness Spearhead contingent task. It was in the late summer that it became apparent that our training and preparation would not be in vain and that a sizeable deployment to Afghanistan was on the cards.

The Vikings currently have 400 soldiers deployed in Afghanistan. A (Norfolk) Company are providing security on the northern side of Musa Qal'eh. C (Essex) Company are conducting a similar role on the south of Nad-e'Ali District Centre, and D (Cambridgeshire) Company is responsible for an area to the north of the key town of Gereshk. My Battalion Headquarters is based in the provincial capital, Lashkar Ghar, and is leading the development of the Afghan National Police across Helmand.

We find ourselves involved in a challenging but absolutely winnable counter-insurgency campaign and the Battalion's contribution is critical, varied and hugely valued. If you were to read the UK media reports from Afghanistan you could be forgiven for assuming that dark clouds were gathering over the NATO mission and that the insurgency was gaining strength. Having been immersed in the work being conducted by the UK military and UK led Provincial Reconstruction Team, I am convinced that whilst it remains hard graft, the battle for the people is turning our way and that this is time for contributing nations to stand fast in their support of the people of Afghanistan. Ultimately we seek to persuade the people of Afghanistan that a better future lies with supporting the Afghan Government and not the Taliban. In all the areas of Afghanistan in which the Vikings are deployed there are 'green shoots', many of which have been the result of the extraordinary professionalism, bravery and determination of our soldiers.

A (Norfolk) Company have recently conducted a significant offensive operation which has expanded the area of Musa Qal'eh in which the people can go about their lives without the threat of intimidation and abuse from the Taliban. They have done this in partnership with the Afghan National Army and Afghan National Police, who are taking a more dominant role in the provision of security. The security situation in Musa Qal'eh, once seen by some as the most dangerous in Afghanistan, is currently very good and the thriving bazaar is testament to the confidence felt by the local people.

C (Essex) Company have found themselves in one of the most contested areas of Central Helmand which means they clash with the Taliban most days. Their operations are providing much needed security to an area to their north in which every day life can continue, schools and clinics can re-open and the Government of Afghanistan can conduct its business. They are also winning over some of the local population and have been successful in convincing them that ISAF and the ANSF can provide a viable alternative to a life under the Taliban. C Company have seen a number of families returning to their homes in an area they are protecting and this is seen as a small example that the pendulum is swinging our way.

D (Cambridgeshire) Company have recently been involved in taking the fight to the enemy whilst improving the lot of the people close to their base. Over the Christmas period they led an important operation to rid areas of farmland of IEDs allowing the locals to safely tend their crops. More recently they conducted a night operation during which they destroyed a bridge that was being used extensively by the Taliban, coming into the area and lacing the countryside with IEDs. The local population are thrilled and have supported the building of a new checkpoint to increase their security. Our Reconnaissance Platoon started the tour with D Company but is now working under the direction of the Task Force Commander in support of operations in Nad-e'Ali and their extensive experience of working in armoured vehicles is being put to good use.

The Battalion Headquarters works alongside the Afghan National Police Headquarters in Helmand and is focussed on assisting the Police transform themselves. As the operational mentor to the Provincial Chief of Police, Colonel Shirzad, I spend much of my time working with him to drive up professional standards, stamp out corruption and increase the size of the force to become the primary security organisation in Helmand. One of the most visible contributions to improving the Afghan National Police has been the building of the Helmand Police Training Centre. This rapidly expanding training establishment will soon have the capacity for 450 trainee policemen and is staffed by UK soldiers, MoD Police and Afghan Ministry of Interior Instructors. The Vikings are fully committed to this venture and have been intimately involved in building of the centre, the logistics to run it, providing security and importantly make up some of the training staff. The Training Centre will hold its first graduation ceremony at the end of January after which 150 newly trained policemen will return to their duties on the frontline of the operations against the Taliban and ready to serve the people.

This impressive work comes with a human cost and at the time of writing this article the Vikings have lost 2 brave soldiers killed in action and a number who have suffered significant injury. Lance Corporal Adam Drane and Private Robert Hayes will be sorely missed by all and especially those who had the privilege to serve with them. I know that both these soldiers were utterly committed to their important work and those of us they have left behind find inspiration in their sacrifice. Our thoughts are with their families.

It would be wrong not to mention those in the Battalion who remain in the UK providing 1<sup>st</sup> class support to those deployed and most importantly to our families. We, as soldiers whose job takes us to far away lands, rely on the support of our families and friends in the UK. I would like to take this opportunity to thank all at home in both Pirbright and East Anglia for the support provided – it is very gratefully received and makes our job that much easier.

I conclude this article by reiterating my strong belief in the cracking work that is being carried out by members of the Vikings and that genuine progress is being made. Over the coming months it is expected that further operations will take place that will significantly change the dynamic in Central Helmand for the better and that will further extend the hand of the Afghan Government to its people.

*Stabilis.*