

## Presentation to the Gunner Dinner (Sydney), 2009 by Capt Josh Bolton

Good evening General and Mrs Ford, Colonel and Mrs Piercy, President of the RAA Association, ladies and gentlemen. Thank you for the opportunity to address you this evening with regards to my experiences as a gunner in Afghanistan.

I deployed to Afghanistan in March 2007 with the 2<sup>nd</sup> Reconstruction Task Force as a Forward Observer. 2007 was perceived to be crucial for the overall mission in Afghanistan; it had been five years since the Taliban was toppled from power, yet many claimed that little progress had been made in the Taliban heartland in the country's south. We were to confront the Taliban at the height of the summer fighting season, buoyed by their success in neighbouring Helmand and Kandahar Provinces. Furthermore, the Taliban had launched an intense propaganda campaign, claiming that thousands of suicide bombers were marching over the mountains of Afghanistan, intent on wreaking destruction on international forces.

Our mission was to 'Rebuild Afghanistan' by building essential health, education and security infrastructure. This would assist the fledgling government of Afghanistan to defeat the Taliban, by winning the hearts and minds of the Afghan people. We were to show them what could be achieved under a peaceful democratic government, working in partnership with an international community, and we were to achieve this in orchestration with a larger Dutch Force, to form Task Force Uruzgan and the Australian Special Operations Task Group.

I was excited, but also anxious about the opportunity to deploy in role, I was uncertain about what I was to experience, witness and be involved in, what I did know, was that I was very fortunate to be chosen to do my job.

My first priority, when arriving in country was establishing a positive and lasting rapport with our Dutch Artillery brethren. They commanded the only all weather, all terrain asset available to support operations, and it was essential we worked together and understood each others capabilities, procedures and limitations.

The Dutch contingent employed the Panzer Howitzer – 2000 (or the PZH 2000) a German Self-Propelled 155mm Howitzer. The gun uses a new modular charge system with six charges to achieve a maximum range of 30 km using standard ammunition, about 35 km with base bleed rounds, and over 40 km with 'Extended Range' projectiles. The gun was reportedly referred to as the 'beast of Tarin Kowt' by the Taliban.

As gunners with a common passion for Artillery, it was very easy to gain a professional trust and friendship with the Dutch gunners who lived alongside their gun. On numerous occasions the Dutch gun Comd Post and the AS Joint Fires Comd Post, which sat side by side, engaged in technical gunnery conversations, which were evidently won by the AS gunners and officers.

Three days after arrival I was tasked as the Forward Observer to support the departing RTF 1 Platoon on a foot mounted patrol through the township of Tarin Kowt. It was to be the first opportunity for me to gain an appreciation of the environment, which we were to call home for the coming eight months. I recall an overwhelming sense of both anticipation and excitement as we conducted final rehearsals, weapon checks, communications checks and gave orders to the Joint Fires Cell for our task.

We circumnavigated the town through the winding back streets to the senior estate for a brief meeting with the local Afghan leadership. Here I established an Observation Post on the top of the estate, to gain command of the ground and coordinate the dedicated UAV and Dutch Apache helicopters. The meeting complete we continued the patrol through the centre of town, paralleling the major market. It was here with my face covered, my body protected by body armour, that I was exposed to the weight of the task at hand, through the sound of rifle fire overhead as stray warnings and the piercing eyes of the Afghan people, expressing their deep hatred of outside forces.

In mid Jun the anticipated major Taliban offensive commenced approximately 40 kilometres North of Tarin Kowt in and around the village of CHORA. During the early afternoon Dutch force elements in CHORA reported Taliban fighters of approximately 800 personnel conducting a coordinated attack on three Afghan police check posts, along the road linking Tarin Kowt to CHORA. Dutch troops had moved forward to support two of the Police posts, the third captured by the Taliban, who killed several members of the post and their family.

In an obvious move to escalate further action, women and children fled the village throughout the afternoon. The Dutch withdrew from the two held checkpoints and handed them back to the Afghan National Police, which were subsequently captured by the Taliban.

At about 2000hrs I received a call to report to the Joint Fires Cell where the Dutch Gun Position Officer, informed me that a Free Fire Area had been established WEST of the village of CHORA due to the imminent threat to ISAF forces. The Dutch Forward Observers and JTAC's were engaging targets with mortars, artillery, Close Air Support – both Rotary and Fixed Wing, and had been in contact for over 4 hours. The Dutch lads in the Command Post and at the gun were at their limits and were requesting Australian gunners to assist in preparing several hundred rounds which were anticipated to be used through the night in a fight which was later termed 'The Battle of CHORA'.

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I summoned as many AS gunners as I could find from LTCOL down to Gunner, and we jumped into our vehicles and headed to the firing point on top of the hill, which was now hidden in a cloud of dust. On arrival the Detachment Commander briefed us. He was being inundated with fire missions and was desperately short of ammunition. Consequently, they were relying on Mercedes Benz 4WD as ammunition limbers to ferry the shells and the charges to the rear of the gun to be prepared for firing.

Eager to get involved, we dropped weapons, body armour and shirts and immediately commenced preparation of the ammunition, removing transit packaging, bands, plugs and inserting fuses. In only what I can imagine as a classic fire base setting, we worked tirelessly throughout the evening. As the beautiful silence of the Afghan night was rocked by the constant resonating sound of the gun and the blast of light from the muzzle break, we stood watching the rear of the projectile disappear into the black sky, before being in-gulfed in an incredible cloud of dust, followed by a rush of adrenaline as we worked to maintain the rate of effort required for the lads in contact.

Returning to the HQ, I was tasked to assist the Dutch JTAC's, controlling Predator UAV's, Dutch F-16's and British Tornado's as we continued targeting through the night.

I have no illusion that supporting the Dutch elements at the gun end was to truly know that we were at war.

Late in the tour we were tasked to push East, into an area of high activity. SOTG had been involved in multiple fire fights against bomb makers and Taliban leadership and the day we launched Dutch Special Forces had been in heavy contact, it was clear that we are moving into an area of Taliban key terrain.

Our task was to insert by foot and establish an OP before dawn, IOT gain intelligence for future operations. I was to be prepared to neutralise the anticipated Taliban probe and cover our withdrawal with all manner of offensive support!

As we crossed the river and detoured into the dasht I felt a moment of relief, we had cleared the close terrain. It was at this point we hit a pressure plate Improvised Explosive Device. Blown half out of the vehicle, I landed with a thump, ears ringing and disorientated as a thick black smoke consumed us. We dropped into the vehicle closed the hatch and prepared for the anticipated ambush. We sat, unable to move, the vehicle rendered inoperable, my personal radio damaged. My immediate concern was confirming the location of the remainder of our call sign and our ability to utilise the PZH. As the smoke dissipated I cautiously opened the hatch, as we resumed our defensive posture and waited. Using the internal vehicle radio I ordered my Ack to reduce the NTM of the gun, prepare an initial target in the dasht and be prepared for danger close.

Curious onlookers steadily occupied the high ground around our location, as the vehicle crew commanders commenced a swift recovery operation. With the gun in direct support and Dutch Apaches anxious to launch, nothing eventuated and I felt everyone in the vehicle breath a sigh of relief. Late that evening I recall sitting a top of our new vehicle observing the area into which we were about to insert. I listened to the sound of RPG's and machine gun fire, the Dutch Special Forces were in contact again. Occasionally the dark of night would instantly turn to daylight as the illumination round from the PZH burst to life, silencing the sporadic sounds of the Taliban fire.

In the early hours of the morning the OC, his interpreter, three snipers and myself stepped off. Our insertion was swift, detouring only slightly to avoid a number of Bedouin camps which had been established along our intended route. We occupied a split OP to ensure security and provide rest. We began to receive an increase in intelligence reports, that the level of Taliban movement was escalating, their intent to draw us into the 'green zone' below. I sat patiently, waiting, laser range finder at the ready.

What I experienced next was in stark contrast to traditional warfare. A small child appeared in a flurry of dust and bells with a herd of goats. He walked around our perimeter constantly maintaining a watchful and patient eye on us. As we exchanged glances I had no doubt the child would report our location to the Taliban. We were compromised. We collapsed the OP and withdrew.

Was this child the enemy? Or just a pawn in this game. This type of counter-insurgency, and the Taliban's ability to constantly alter and challenge conventional warfare will continue to confront our troops who remain on the ground.

I hope my shared experiences have provided you with an insight into the life of a gunner on operations. My experience was not simply drills or how to execute an IN, but of the importance of preparation for battle, constant liaison with coalition forces and the relationship which must be fostered with the ground commander.

The assets available and the weapons employed may have changed over time, but fundamentally the role of the gunner has remained the same in support of combat operations. **On time, on target and SAFE.**