

Toe to Toe with the Taliban
Bravo Company Fights in Makuan
by
Kevin M. Hymel

Confusion reigned. An improvised explosive device (IED) had just detonated beneath the boot of an American lieutenant, tearing through the men of 2d Platoon. Soldiers screamed and yelled. Those not tossed into the air were thrown to the ground. The device had exploded only 15 minutes after two other IEDs ripped through 3d Platoon, which 2d Platoon was attempting to support. The blasts rendered both platoons ineffective. The Afghan town of Makuan was proving itself a deadly place for the men of Bravo Company, 1st Battalion, 502d Infantry Regiment (1-502d IN), 2d Brigade Combat Team, 101st Airborne Division (Air Assault).

Bravo Company had entered Makuan the previous day to clear the area of IEDs, bomb-making facilities, and insurgents. On this night of 17 September 2010, the Soldiers conducted a clearing operation before they were to head south toward the Arghandab River, one kilometer away. Most of Bravo's noncommissioned officers (NCOs) hated moving through an area strewn with IEDs at night, but they had their orders. Now, in only a few minutes, a clearing operation had become a company commander's nightmare: a mass casualty situation.

The Plan

Bravo Company's mission in Makuan was part of Operation DRAGON STRIKE, a brigade-sized operation designed to clear the Taliban out of Kandahar Province's Zhari District in southeastern Afghanistan. The town of Makuan was located approximately 24 kilometers west of Kandahar, one kilometer south of Highway One, and a kilometer north of the Arghandab River. As the main east-west route between Kandahar to the east and Gereshk to the west, Highway One proved a favorite Taliban target. The Taliban used Makuan as an IED factory, a bed-down area for insurgents moving in and out of Kandahar, and a consolidation position for attacks on Highway One traffic. Protected from the north by a series of IED belts, Makuan contained an active enemy who had driven the civilians out of the area.¹

Makuan consisted of a series of mud compounds and grape huts surrounded by grape rows, marijuana fields, and pomegranate orchards—some of which were separated by mud walls. The dense terrain resembled the hedgerow country of 1944 Normandy, France. Grape vines stood as

tall as a Soldier. “When you step into them, you just disappear,” said Captain James “Brandon” Prisock, Bravo Company’s commander. A canal ran east-to-west just north of the town, with numerous *wadis*—dry river beds—running through the area.²

To drive the enemy out of Makuan, Lieutenant Colonel Johnny Davis, the 1-502d IN commander, tasked Charlie Company, on the battalion’s right flank, with attacking an area eight kilometers northeast of Makuan, east of the city of Senjaray and pushing down to the Arghandab River. Simultaneously, he ordered Alpha Company to attack south out of Senjaray. With these shaping operations distracting the enemy, Bravo Company, a company of US Army Rangers, and an Afghanistan National Army (ANA) company would air-assault south of Makuan. The combined force would advance north, clearing the town of insurgents and IEDs. The surprised enemy would have nowhere to run but north, into the battalion’s Delta Company and Headquarters and Headquarters Company, positioned along Highway One. The air assault was set for 12 September 2010.³

Bravo Company had been fighting the Taliban along Highway One since late May 2010, engaging the enemy two or three times a day. “We lost a lot of guys in the beginning,” said Specialist Jason Leigh, the company radio telephone operator (RTO). “We had a lot of casualties.”⁴ The company had been split between two Combat Out Posts (COPs) in the village of Pashmul, approximately four kilometers southwest of Makuan. When Bravo transferred to FOB Wilson, northwest of Makuan, the whole unit reunited and received a new commander. Captain Prisock took over Bravo on 5 September, seven days before DRAGON STRIKE’s expected kick-off date. He had served a tour in Iraq and helped plan DRAGON STRIKE as a member of the battalion’s operations staff. The arrival of a new commander and the unit’s consolidation had a profound effect on the men. “Morale changed,” explained Captain Luke Rella, the company’s executive officer (XO). “People started actually feeling like they were part of a team again, and they really cared about the unit.”⁵

Captain Prisock had studied the enemy’s tactics. He read *The Other Side of the Mountain*, a book about *mujahideen* attacks on Soviets during the Soviet-Afghan War, specifically the section on ambushes along Highway One, north of Makuan. “[The Taliban] were fighting from the exact same positions that [the *mujahideen*] fought [the Soviets],” explained Prisock. “We noticed that they were fighting in the exact same way.”⁶

Captain Prisock’s command included three rifle platoons: First Lieutenant Charles Ragland’s 1st Platoon, First Lieutenant Taylor

Murphy's 2d Platoon, and First Lieutenant Nicholas Williams' 3d Platoon. All three platoon leaders were on their first combat tour, but their noncommissioned officers were combat veterans. Prisock also had extra assets for his mission: a squad of engineers, an Explosive Ordnance Disposal (EOD) team, a Human Intelligence Collection Team, and the battalion's Advanced Trauma Life Support unit. He also received an Assault Breacher Vehicle platoon from the US Marine Corps; Seabees (engineers) from the US Navy; and bomb-sniffing dogs from both the US Air Force and the Navy. The extra units swelled Bravo Company to the equivalent of nine platoons.⁷

Charlie Company launched its attack on 7 September, "and boy, did they bring out the enemy," said Lieutenant Colonel Davis, "and that set up the conditions for us to push Bravo Company."⁸ While Charlie Company engaged the enemy, the men of Bravo Company rehearsed the air assault at FOB Wilson. They were ready, but as the 12 September date drew near, the Rangers were committed to a different mission and a storm front threatened to ground the assault helicopters. The date was pushed back twice until 14 September at 2230, when the men were told to stand down for 48 hours. An hour later, as the Bravo men bedded down, orders came that the operation would kick off in about eight hours. Most of the soldiers were awakened out of their first sleep in days and scrambled to get ready.⁹

The air assault had been cancelled, but with the larger operation already underway, Lieutenant Colonel Davis needed Bravo Company to conduct a ground attack. The men now had eight hours to get themselves to an Afghan National Police (ANP) station five miles northeast on Highway One for the jump-off. "It was a mess," said the company's First Sergeant Nathan Stone, "but we moved." Stone organized the men into chinks, just as he would for an air assault. "We just used our vehicles like helicopters," he explained.¹⁰ Stone placed milk crates where the trucks would arrive. Men lined up and counted off as they mounted the trucks, which then whisked them down Highway One. The trucks then made round trips to pick up other chinks. Some of the soldiers worried that the massive movement would alert the insurgents. "We're definitely tipping our hand [to the enemy] at that point," commented Lieutenant Nicholas Williams.¹¹ First Sergeant Stone boarded the last truck and arrived at the ANP station just as the company began moving south toward Makuan. "That's how hard we pushed it," he said.¹²

Breaching by MICLIC

Bravo Company did not attack alone. Three US Marine Corps Assault Breacher Vehicles (ABVs), M1 tank chassis fitted with a mine plow and M58 Mine Clearing Line Charges (MICLICs), would breach the enemy lines and eliminate any IEDs awaiting the infantry. Accompanying the ABVs were two M88 Tank Recovery Vehicles, armed with .50-caliber machine guns and IED plows, and a number of Mine Resistant Ambush Protected (MRAP) vehicles. Captain Prisock positioned Bravo Company behind the ABVs. Once the ABVs started rolling forward, the men would advance and protect their flanks.

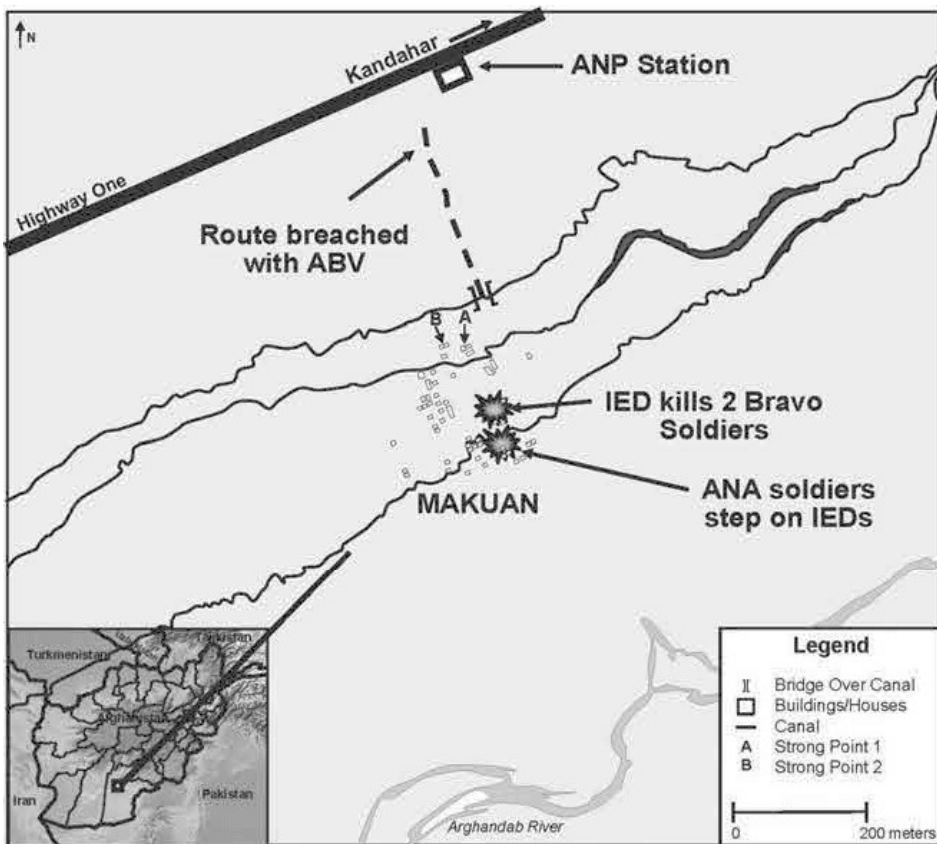


Figure 1. The Makuan Operation, 14-18 September 2010.

As the sun rose on 15 September, one of the ABVs fired a MICLIC, commencing the operation. Like a spider shooting a web, the MICLIC rocket shot out of the ABV as the line charge uncoiled behind it. The rocket arced over the IED-strewn grape field and landed 100 meters away. The line charge then detonated, shaking the earth and raising a huge, long cloud of dirt. Sympathetic detonations added to the power of the explosion. When the dust settled, an eight-meter-wide path had been cut through

the IEDs in the grape rows. Everyone remembered the power of the MICLIC. “You can see the earth move in front of you,” said Sergeant Zac McDonald.¹³ “Those are the loudest things you’ll ever hear in your life,” added Air Force Staff Sergeant Brent Olson, one of Bravo Company’s dog handlers.¹⁴ “Everything feels tight for a minute,” explained Staff Sergeant Nicholas Christensen, “[your] ears are ringing, and the dust. It’s almost too much to bear, but then it ends quickly.”¹⁵ Staff Sergeant Joseph Roberts may have explained the effect best when he said, “It’s like a precursor to the things to come.”¹⁶ Insurgents began running away from a *wadi* line just south of the breach. A Soldier in the ANP station’s tower, manning a Mark 19 40mm grenade launcher, fired rounds at the exposed enemy while the Marine ABVs opened up with their .50-caliber machine guns.¹⁷



Figure 2. An Assault Breacher Vehicle (ABV) cuts through the grape field en route to Makuan.

Photo courtesy of Captain Nicholas Williams

Ten minutes after the first MICLIC fired, the ABV rolled through the initial breach point, shot a second MICLIC into the sky, and again clanked forward. But when it fired a third MICLIC, the line charge failed to explode. A Marine ran out of the vehicle, attached hand-held charges and detonated it himself.¹⁸ “That guy right there deserves a medal,” said First Sergeant Stone. After the third explosion, Bravo’s men moved to the ABV’s flank, providing security. “We were worried that [the enemy] would try and take

it out,” explained Stone.¹⁹ Unfortunately, the MICLIC’s devastating effects made the bomb-sniffing dogs paranoid and edgy. According to Lieutenant Murphy, walking through an area blasted by a MICLIC “kind of messed up their noses because you have 2,000 pounds of explosive ordnance out there. So having them out during the initial breach is what really screwed them up for the whole operation.”²⁰

The Bridge at the Canal

At 1000 Bravo Company reached a bridge over a canal running east to west across the direction of attack. Homemade explosive bags were stuffed beneath the bridge and a 10-foot pipe was buried across it. On the other side of the bridge, an IED hung from a tree. It was a clever ploy. Anyone disarming the IEDs on the bridge would expose themselves to the tree-borne IED. A waiting insurgent could detonate them both. “Anybody exposed is going to get hit by shrapnel,” said Prisock. The Marines fired a MICLIC over the bridge, but the resulting explosion failed to ignite the explosives on the bridge. The EOD men explained to Prisock that they could not blow the bridge without first securing the other end. The threat of enemy attack by direct and indirect fire was simply too great.²¹



Figure 3. Two IEDs lay partially concealed on the far bank of the bridge over the canal (inside circle).

Photo courtesy of First Lieutenant Taylor Murphy

Captain Prisock called in an airstrike. Two A-10 Thunderbolt II ground-attack aircraft swooped in and dropped two 500-pound Guided Bomb Units (GBUs), destroying the bridge and detonating approximately nine IEDs. Prisock then ordered two MICLICs to fire east and west of the bridge, parallel to the canal, detonating seven IEDs and clearing out a wider avenue of approach. The Seabees began plowing mud with their D7 bulldozers, creating an impromptu bridge, but they failed to transport a collection of large steel pipes that would have served as the base for the mound, allowing water to flow through the new bridge. By 1600, with nowhere for the water to go, the area flooded. Prisock explained to the Seabees what needed to be done and oversaw their work. “It was just weird,” said Lieutenant Williams, “having infantry guys telling the Seabees, whose job it is to build stuff, how to build the bridge.”²² Stalled at the bridge, Bravo Company could no longer keep driving the enemy in front of it. Replacing the bridge seriously delayed the push to Makuan.²³

Lieutenant Ragland’s 1st Platoon and Lieutenant Murphy’s 2d Platoon pulled security along the canal’s north bank, east and west of the bridge, respectively. Ragland deployed behind a dirt berm when one of his soldiers, Specialist Mark Baidinger, told Sergeant Nicholas Christensen he had to see the medic. Christensen agreed but told him to walk behind him and not up on the berm, where he would be exposed. “Roger, Sergeant,” Baidinger said, but stepped on top of the berm anyway.²⁴ Suddenly, the enemy opened fire from across the canal with a B-10 82mm recoilless rifle. The round hit a tree above Baidinger, raining shrapnel and lacerating his left arm, leg and back, and breaking his femur. A piece of shrapnel caught Sergeant Derek Dodd in the neck. Several Soldiers carried Baidinger to the rear while Captain Prisock called for a medical evacuation (MEDEVAC). Sergeant Dodd stayed in the fight.²⁵

The enemy then opened up with rocket propelled grenades (RPGs), machine guns, and AK47 assault rifles from behind a mud wall. Both platoons returned fire with small arms and an M240 medium machine gun. Soon 60mm and 120mm mortars, along with 155mm artillery, added to the fight. “[We] could see them moving in the wood line,” explained Staff Sergeant Zac McDonald. “They weren’t static.” With the canal separating the enemy from the two platoons and the bridge unusable, the Americans could only return fire. “We weren’t in a situation where we could chase them,” McDonald added.²⁶ Instead of firing from cover, the untrained ANA soldiers stood up while shooting from the hip. They simply lacked the Americans’ level of training and did not have enough time in the field.²⁷

When Prisock's 60mm mortars ran out of ammunition, Captain Rella sent for resupply, and a Light Medium Tactical Vehicle (LMTV) sped down the dirt road to the mortar position. Soldiers threw green smoke grenades to cover the mortar crews running back to retrieve the ammo. Unfortunately, the smoke served an unintended purpose: the MEDEVAC HH-60 Black Hawk helicopter pilot, misinterpreting the smoke as a landing zone, swooped in and tried to land within range of the enemy fire. Specialist Leigh tried to raise the pilot on the radio, but could not find his frequency. He then contacted the battalion headquarters, hoping they would relay his directions to the HH-60 before it landed. First Sergeant Stone threw clods of dirt at the helicopter, trying to get the pilot's attention. Other Soldiers stopped firing, ran over to the landing helicopter, and waved it off. The helicopter then circled and tried to land again. The men repeated the process. Finally, the Black Hawk left the firefight and landed in 3d Platoon's rear perimeter. "He basically landed right on top of me," explained Staff Sergeant Joseph Jackel, who told the MEDEVAC crew chief, "Get the hell out here! We've already got the casualty up on the road."²⁸



The mortars made the difference. The suppression provided by the high explosive rounds and the smoke provided by the white phosphorous rounds eventually gave the Americans fire superiority over their well-entrenched enemy. When the insurgents broke contact, Lieutenant Williams led his platoon splashing across the canal, where they found a big mud wall from where the enemy had fired. Holes were dug under the wall for hideouts and weapons storage. Bravo Company encountered more of these mud walls throughout the operation. "The area where we were was almost built for trench warfare," explained Lieutenant Charles Ragland.²⁹

Makuan

After the initial confrontation, the company cleared the final 200 meters south into Makuan. With the sun setting, Lieutenant Williams wanted to move quickly, but refused to rush his men in an IED-infested area. In the darkness, the men secured two compounds on the town's northeast corner, designated Strong Point One and Strong Point Two. Bravo Company's Headquarters and 1st and 2d platoons occupied Strong Point One, while 3d Platoon and most of the ANA occupied Strong Point Two. Using white lights attached to their rifles and mine detectors, the men cleared the buildings. "If we saw something," explained Lieutenant Williams, "we tied 550 [cord] to it, we backed out of the room and we'd pull it in case it was some kind of tamper."³⁰ For security, Lieutenant Murphy's mortar crews emplaced their weapons and fired off a few illumination rounds to

set their base plates into the ground. During this part of the operation, the men of Bravo Company encountered no one.³¹

The exhausted men finished clearing the strong points by 0130 the next morning. Some Soldiers set up security positions while others bedded down. Unfortunately, everyone's assault packs were north of the canal, leaving the men to curl up on the floor without their blankets or cold-weather gear as the temperature dropped. Many Soldiers were still wet from the canal crossing. Making matters worse, Army engineers began blowing up a nearby tree line to provide better fields of fire and deprive the enemy of cover and concealment. The engineers attached blocks of C4 to the trees and ignited the fuses.³² Some white phosphorous from the day's battle set off one of the fuses early. An engineer smelled the burning fuse and told everyone to get inside the compound, which they did as the charge detonated. "No one was injured," said Murphy, "but that was a close call."³³

The engineers' work proved dangerous for Bravo's men. Lieutenant Ragland was talking to one of his team leaders inside Strong Point One when an explosion erupted outside. "A huge fireball comes in the room," recalled Ragland. "We thought we were getting attacked."³⁴ Other nearby detonations lifted sleeping men off the floor and slammed them back down. Sergeant Christensen was sleeping in a sheep hut when a huge explosion woke him. He thought an RPG had hit. Grabbing his rifle, he escaped as the roof caved in. Once out, he ran into Prisock, who asked "Are you okay?"³⁵ He was, but the engineers continued their work until daylight, making sleep difficult for the men.³⁶

First Day in Makuan

By 0300 that morning, the tired Soldiers of Bravo Company began clearing Makuan. Lieutenants Murphy and Williams' platoons cleared compounds, while Ragland's 1st Platoon leveled the trees lines along the *wadis*. With all their heavy support vehicles north of the canal, the men used C4 explosives to blow holes in mud walls surrounding pomegranate orchards and fired anti-personnel obstacle breaching systems (APOBs), a smaller two-man version of the MICLIC, to clear paths along trails and roads. IEDs infested the area. Whenever the Soldiers fired an APOB, there were numerous sympathetic detonations. The men even found two IEDs just outside Strong Point Two.³⁷

Inside Makuan's various buildings, the men found cartons and wrappers for 82mm recoilless rifle boosters, RPG rounds, and other Soviet-era ammunition. They also discovered parts of land mines. The

buildings contained fresh fruits and vegetables and plenty of bedding but no personal items.³⁸ It was, according to Lieutenant Murphy, “just a bed-down location.”³⁹ All of the compounds were empty, but the men knew Makuan was no ghost town. “We pretty much had that feeling most of the time that they were watching us,” explained Specialist Leigh, “that there was somebody out there.”⁴⁰

The enemy had not abandoned the area. Providing security for engineers blowing up trees, Lieutenant Murphy’s 2d platoon deployed along a chest-high wall across from a pomegranate orchard. Suddenly, an enemy recoilless rifle round exploded against the wall. Specialist Christopher Tolintino, although protected by the wall, was caught in the blast. He stumbled backwards and doubled over. Murphy ran over to him, but Tolintino was okay. “He got his bell rung pretty good,” remembered Specialist Leigh.⁴¹



The platoon fired into the pomegranate orchard but the shooter did not return fire. Approximately a half-hour later, the enemy opened up again, this time with AK47s. Lieutenant Murphy’s men spotted two individuals running through the orchard and opened fire. “They were running pretty fast,” said Murphy, “and if we did hit them, it didn’t slow them down.” Murphy called in mortars, and while adjusting fire, another recoilless rifle round exploded in the distance, followed by accurate PKM machine-gun fire.⁴² “I never felt machine-gun fire in that amount of mass before,” explained Sergeant Zac McDonald. “It was a massive roar...and they had to have multiple PKMs in multiple positions to be able to match that fire.”⁴³

Murphy stood behind the wall, holding his M4 rifle against his chest with his right hand when he felt something impact on his chest plate. He reflexively stuck his hand under the plate to see if he had been hit. Seeing no blood, he continued to call in rounds and fire his rifle. As rounds smacked around Murphy’s head, he had his machine gunner set up a firing position at a gap in the wall, then reported the situation to Prisock, and called in aerial support fire from the on-station AH-64 Apache and OH-58 Kiowa helicopters. Staff Sergeant McDonald asked Murphy if he was okay and began checking his body when he noticed blood dripping from Murphy’s right glove. Murphy had, in fact, been hit in the wrist. McDonald applied a tourniquet to Murphy’s arm as a precaution.⁴⁴ When Staff Sergeant Jaime Newman heard what happened, he brought up the medic, Specialist Michael Babinski, who loosened the tourniquet and wrapped a Kerlix bandage on the wound.⁴⁵ Everyone kept telling Murphy to get his wrist examined, but he just brushed them off. “I’m good, I’m good,” he insisted.⁴⁶

Two Delta Company MRAP All Terrain Vehicles (M-ATVs), which had crossed the now-completed bridge, added to Murphy's return fire with Mark 19 grenade launchers and .50-caliber machine guns, but, in the confusion, also fired at Williams' 3d Platoon on Murphy's right flank. Captain Prisock called the Delta Company commander and told him to cease fire. It took two tries before the Delta Company men stopped firing. Prisock's Air Force Joint Terminal Attack Controllers (JTAC) directed helicopter gunships firing 2.75mm rockets and 30mm cannons at selected targets. Then Prisock brought his 60mm mortar men forward, who fired all their rounds in hand-held mode. Prisock added A-10s to the collective effort, which flew gun runs along the pomegranate field and dropped bombs, flushing out the enemy.⁴⁷

While Lieutenant Murphy coordinated fire suppression on the northern section of the orchard, Lieutenant Williams maneuvered his 3d Platoon to the west side of the orchard. While Williams' men prepared to breach a compound wall, a recoilless rifle round slammed into the compound. The Soldiers took cover. A-10s bombed the orchard, and Williams' men breached the wall and entered the compound. They climbed onto the roof where they exchanged fire with insurgents in a *wadi* line until Staff Sergeant Heneghan shouted, "Cease fire! Cease fire!"⁴⁸

An insurgent fired at Williams' men and ran into the pomegranate orchard. The men opened fire but failed to hit him.⁴⁹ An Apache helicopter pursued, firing its 30mm chain gun. The A-10s spotted another insurgent in a *wadi* line 400 meters from William's men and strafed the area. "We saw part of his torso fly through the air," recalled Williams.⁵⁰ The JTACs continued to guide A-10s bombing missions on enemy strong points. Prisock followed up the airstrikes with 120mm mortars. All the while, Williams' platoon remained in the compound, providing overwatch for Murphy. "It was one of the more intense firefights I've been in," explained Staff Sergeant Joshua Reese, one of Williams' squad leaders.⁵¹

With the enemy suppressed, Lieutenant Murphy led his platoon into the pomegranate orchard, using APOBs to clear a path. They found empty enemy firing positions, brass casings, and a bloodstain on the ground. Murphy led his men further south, looking for insurgents and conducting a bomb damage assessment (BDA) on a compound levelled by a 500-pound bomb. As night fell, the Soldiers, not finding anything, returned to Strong Point One.⁵²

In the dark, a sergeant from Lieutenant Williams' platoon spotted two insurgents, and instead of firing at them, asked Williams what he should do.

By the time Williams said “engage,” the two took off running toward two structures. Captain Prisock called the A-10s to bomb the structures. The bombing required a BDA, so Williams led his men, in the dark, to the area where they found evidence of one bomb, but not the other. “You’d think it would be easy to find a 500-pound bomb drop,” explained Williams, “but it went right through the ceiling and no debris had come into the clearing, so we really can’t find it.”⁵³



Figure 4. A Bravo Company Soldier conducts a bomb damage assessment on a Makuan compound.

Photo courtesy of Captain Nicholas Williams

As the men prepared to bed down for the night, some could hear the enemy reoccupying the village and digging holes for more IEDs. “You knew they were out there,” explained First Sergeant Stone.⁵⁴ Staff Sergeant Reese admitted, “It was a really sickening feeling. I personally heard them digging.” Captain Prisock could hear prayers from a nearby mosque.⁵⁵

Captain Prisock met with Lieutenant Colonel Johnny Davis, the battalion commander, and explained the futility of checking every empty compound in an area that included, according to Prisock, “tons of IEDs.” The results were not worth the effort, or, as Captain Prisock told Davis, “The juice is not worth the squeeze.”⁵⁶ Davis agreed, but pointed out the battalion’s limited window on its ABVs and air assets to complete DRAGON STRIKE. He expressed confidence that Prisock had enough

support elements to clear Makuan. “Brandon, I think you can do it,” said Davis. “I think we can clear this and get to the next *wadi* line, so that we can cut this facilitation zone in half because remember, we’re just one part of the Dragon Strike.”⁵⁷ The two officers agreed to build up the strong points, destroy the tree lines, clear the trails around the strong points and improve the bridge and roads. The ultimate goal became creating a combat outpost in Makuan and preventing the enemy from returning.⁵⁸ 

Around midnight, Lieutenant Murphy finally had a chance to take off his body armor. He found a bullet lodged in it. “I was pretty pissed off because it had actually shattered my camera.” He brought his armor plate to the ANP station and switched it with a new one. An ANP officer pried the bullet out of Murphy’s chest plate and explained he needed to keep the bullet for forensic evidence. Murphy would have no souvenir.⁵⁹

Second Day in Makuan

Before sunrise on 16 September, Bravo’s three platoons headed out once again, searching for IEDs and clearing tree lines. They engaged the enemy twice during the day: first, against a lone teenager with an AK47 who fled at the sight of the Americans; second, when insurgents fired at some Delta Company trucks. In both cases, the Soldiers opened fire with small arms and called for fire support from orbiting A-10s.⁶⁰

That night, around 1930, orders came down from battalion that Lieutenant Colonel Davis needed Makuan entirely cleared by 1200 the next day. Davis wanted Bravo Company to push down to a *wadi* line south of the town, enabling his other companies to continue their operations on Bravo’s flanks. To meet this deadline, Prisock needed to send his Soldiers out at night, the most dangerous time to search for IEDs.⁶¹ “He was kind of between a rock and a hard place,” explained Specialist Leigh. “Everybody knew that doing this at night was a bad idea.”⁶² The company had already come across numerous IEDs. “The town was rigged,” said Captain Rella, the XO, “it’s got nothing but anti-personnel mines all over the place and [IEDs in buildings].”⁶³ Staff Sergeant Jackel was more blunt, “You don’t patrol at night because of the IED threat. You can’t see [anything].”⁶⁴

As the sun set, Lieutenant Williams led 15 Americans, six ANA Soldiers, and a bomb-sniffing German Shepherd named Blek, out of Strong Point One. All of the men wore night vision goggles (NVGs). In the town, the Soldiers climbed to the roof of a compound where they had conducted the previous night’s BDA and worked their way down into the rooms, finding bomb-making materials. Some of Williams’ men returned to the compound where they had provided overwatch for Lieutenant Murphy the

day before and set up security posts on the roof, while Williams and the rest of the men searched a nearby two-story grape hut.⁶⁵

The ANA soldiers refused to walk up the grape hut's exterior stairs, so an American swept the stairs with a mine detector. Air Force Staff Sergeant Brent Olson sent Blek sniffing up and down the stairs. Convinced that the stairs were safe, the ANA soldiers headed up. The first Soldier made it up the stairs, but as the second reached the third step, he triggered an IED. There was a flash, and smoke blinded everyone. The ANA Soldier's legs were nearly blown off. He screamed in pain, joined by others who had been hit by shrapnel. Staff Sergeant Jackel shouted "IED! IED!" as Staff Sergeant Heneghan rolled on the ground, shouting that he could not hear anything. Other Soldiers fell wounded. Staff Sergeant Olson stumbled around the base of the stairs as Blek whimpered from shrapnel wounds.⁶⁶

Staff Sergeant Olson reeled in Blek's leash and checked him for wounds. "While I was doing that," recalled Olson, "I felt my right arm start to go numb and it just fell." He felt under his right armpit with his left hand and found blood. "I'm hit," he called out. In the smoke and confusion, others shouted back "Who's hit?" "The dog handler!" Olson replied. He dropped to a knee and was falling backwards when the platoon medic caught him. Olson suffered a broken right arm, a burn on his left arm, a piece of metal sticking out of his leg above the knee, and shrapnel wounds throughout his upper body.⁶⁷ Lieutenant Williams flipped up his NVGs and turned on the blue light attached to his rifle, looking for blood on the ground and on his soldiers. Other men turned on their white lights. Staff Sergeant Jackel ordered the uninjured men to stand still, face out, and pull security. "Don't move!" he yelled, not wanting to set off another IED.⁶⁸

Back at Strong Point One, the Soldiers, hearing the explosion, donned their gear and put on their NVGs. Staff Sergeant Newman told Staff Sergeant Roberts to organize a fire team and set up a helicopter landing zone (HLZ) for Williams' position. As Roberts led his team out the door, Sergeant McDonald rushed over to Lieutenant Murphy and told him his men were ready. "Stand by," explained Murphy, "let's see what happens."⁶⁹

At the blast site, Lieutenant Williams dragged the injured ANA Soldier to a casualty collection point (CCP) in the compound where his men stood overwatch. "I could see his femur sticking out," said Williams, "and his other leg is real mangled." But when Williams reached the compound's wall, he found fresh IEDs inside. "I guess they had seen us earlier and had to infil behind us from a back door once we left," said Williams. "[We] either interrupted them or they didn't have time [to arm the IEDs]." As

Williams sought a new place to bring the ANA Soldier, three other ANA Soldiers came running up the road to him. “I’m trying to tell them to stop,” said Williams, not wanting people to move around excessively. Just then, one of the ANA Soldiers stepped on an IED five feet from Williams.⁷⁰

Williams found himself on the ground with his ears ringing. He felt nauseous. He got up and checked the ANA soldiers. One was fine, one had lost a leg, and the third had lost both legs below the knees. Williams began placing tourniquets on the men’s arms and legs. “I think I used six tourniquets,” he said. Staff Sergeant Heneghan, already injured in the first blast, was sitting nearby when the second IED detonated. “After the second one, he was done,” explained Williams. “He literally was lying on the ground yelling at people.” Williams set up a new CCP about ten meters away in another compound’s courtyard and moved Heneghan there, bleeding from the ears.⁷¹ Several Soldiers helped Staff Sergeant Olson walk to the CCP. Olson refused to be placed on a poleless litter. “There’s no support structure,” Olson said of the flimsy device that relied on straps instead of poles. But Olson’s condition worsened. Feeling light headed, he asked his comrades to help him get down on his knees. He called to Blek and started petting him. “[Blek] didn’t even realize I was there,” Olson recalled.⁷²

Williams assessed his situation. Altogether, he had 11 casualties on his hands: seven Americans, three ANA, and one dog. Two men were urgent surgical: the ANA Soldier who stepped on the first IED and Staff Sergeant Olson, who was bleeding profusely. In a span of five minutes, two IEDs had cut Williams’ unit strength in half. He realized the enemy had lined the whole road with IEDs. The uninjured ANA Soldiers panicked. Screaming and yelling, they pointed their M16 rifles at the Americans. Williams’ translator forgot every word of English he knew and sat on the ground. The ANA soldiers picked up their wounded comrades and carried them back to Strong Point One.⁷³

Lieutenant Murphy’s Reaction Force

Back at Strong Point One, everyone heard the second explosion. They listened as Staff Sergeant Jackel reported, “I need help, I’ve got more casualties than I can secure or move.”⁷⁴ The ANA at the strong points were anxious. They demanded permission to leave but Captain Prisock did not want them going outside. “The ANA were relatively untrained, [had] very poor discipline [and] no night vision devices,” he explained.⁷⁵ First Sergeant Stone was able to calm the ANA at Strong Point One but at Strong Point Two the ANA were more forceful. When Staff Sergeant

Joshua Reese blocked the door, ANA Soldiers pointed their M16s at him. He let them leave. As the ANA ran out in a disorganized manner, one fired into the air, sending tracers over the heads of Lieutenant Williams and his men. "That put everyone on edge," said Williams.⁷⁶ Seeing the tracers and the unidentified ANA soldiers rushing around, Jackel called back to Strong Point One, "I think we're going to get overrun."⁷⁷

Captain Prisock contacted Battalion Headquarters and reported that he had a mass casualty situation (MASCAL) alerting the MEDEVACs. He told Lieutenant Murphy to get down to Lieutenant Williams' position and help set up an HLZ. Murphy ran outside and told Sergeant Roberts that he now needed his whole squad as a reaction force to head towards Williams.⁷⁸ Everyone wanted to head out. Sergeant Christensen organized his squad until First Sergeant Stone told him to recharge his hand-held IED jammers.⁷⁹ As Christensen changed his batteries, Staff Sergeant Newman approached him and said, "Hey, man, I've got a set that works right now, my guys are ready to go. Let me take this." Christensen agreed and told him, "All right brother, I'll be right behind you, as soon as they let me go."⁸⁰

Lieutenant Murphy, now with a whole squad, reviewed the route with Sergeant McDonald, who led the unit. Captain Prisock had planned to go out with Murphy, but was delayed as Lieutenant Eric Yates, the Fire Support Officer, prepared his gear. Murphy led his force out to Williams' position, soon followed by Prisock and a handful of his headquarters Soldiers. As Prisock's team crossed through a marijuana field, they noticed an ANA Soldier pass by with a wounded comrade on his back, headed to Strong Point One.⁸¹

The two ANA soldiers approached the front gate where Sergeant Scot Gerwitz stood guard. Gerwitz tried to help them but one pointed his M16 rifle in Gerwitz's face. Gerwitz grabbed the weapon, tossed it aside and helped the injured ANA Soldier to Strong Point One's CCP, which First Sergeant Stone had established, along with a second HLZ. Lieutenant Ragland's men laid out infrared chemical lights to guide the helicopters. When the first Black Hawk landed, the men loaded the ANA soldiers with missing legs. Trucks from the ANA and Delta Company also arrived to take more wounded north. As more ANA Soldiers drifted into the strong points, the men inside ripped up shirts for bandages and broke up a ladder to create splints. When they ran out of tourniquets, the men fashioned their own.⁸²

Lieutenant Murphy's team continued south toward Williams. When Murphy told Sergeant McDonald to push forward, Staff Sergeant Newman

preached caution, “Lieutenant, would you think about this a little bit and make sure we’re doing the right thing?” Murphy took his advice, stopped, and sent McDonald to find the best way to Williams. McDonald pushed through a marijuana field and made contact with a few of Williams’ men. “They were spread real thin because they had been hit with those IEDs,” said McDonald, who reported back to Murphy that the link was established.⁸³

Meanwhile, Captain Prisock’s team made it through the marijuana field and caught up with Murphy’s men on a trail along a wall. In the darkness, Lieutenant Yates, following behind Sergeant Newman and Prisock, stepped on another IED. The powerful blast knocked everyone down. Debris flew through the air, peppering the soldiers. The heat was intense. “It felt like all of a sudden somebody opened an oven right behind you,” said Prisock who dropped to one knee as something large flew by his right side.⁸⁴ Specialist Babinski, the medic, was thrown up against a wall. Screams again filled the air. Weapons and equipment littered the ground.⁸⁵

In the blinding dust, Sergeant McDonald grabbed Lieutenant Murphy and asked him if he was okay. “I’m all right, I’m all right,” Murphy replied. Both had been hit in the back with shrapnel.⁸⁶ Everyone who could flipped up their NVGs and turned on their red, white, or blue lights. “The threat of casualties bleeding out overwhelmed our fear of the enemy seeing our lights,” explained Murphy. “They already knew where we were anyway.”⁸⁷ Murphy and McDonald assessed the casualties, trying to find out the severity of the injuries and figure out who was healthy enough to pull security. Murphy found Yates first, mortally wounded but conscious. He reassured Yates that he was going to be okay. “Yeah,” said Yates, “I’ll be okay. I know you got me.”⁸⁸ Soldiers moved Yates into the blast hole—the safest place after an IED attack. Specialist Babinski shook Yates. He did not respond. Babinski asked for some light so he could assess Yates wounds. Other soldiers were shouting “Medic!” so he instructed the men around Yates to apply tourniquets while he assessed the other casualties.⁸⁹

Babinski checked everyone near the blast site. Some were cut from shrapnel, others from rocks. Most were dazed. “Luckily, they were in the prone [position] so they didn’t catch [much] shrapnel,” explained Babinski. Pieces of shrapnel lodged above Sergeant Roberts’ Adam’s apple and his cheek.⁹⁰ Babinski returned to Yates, checked the tourniquets and stuffed combat gauze into his wounds. Yates opened his eyes and asked Babinski how he was doing. “Pretty good,” Babinski replied and asked Yates how he was feeling. “Tired,” was his only reply as he closed his eyes.⁹¹ Captain Prisock showed up and told Yates, “Hey, stick with us, hang in there, stay

with us.” Yates opened his eyes again. “Hey, I’m with you,” said Prisock. The two men then said a prayer together.⁹²

Lieutenant Murphy told Prisock he had 12 wounded and only five or six combat-effective Soldiers. Prisock raised Lieutenant Colonel Davis on the radio and told him he had a second MASCAL and needed multiple MEDEVACs.⁹³ Now there would be three HLZs: one for Williams’ 3d Platoon, one for Murphy’s 2d, and one for the strong points. First Sergeant Stone organized all three from Strong Point One and coordinated the MEDEVACs. Staff Sergeant Christensen, watching Stone’s actions, was impressed with how smoothly he ran the three MASCALS. “He did an outstanding job,” Christensen recalled.⁹⁴

Lieutenant Murphy established security while Sergeant McDonald set up a CCP in the middle of the marijuana field. Those uninjured helped the wounded and set up an HLZ in a wheat field on the edge of the marijuana rows. Murphy and several men carried Lieutenant Yates on a poleless litter, but he kept sliding off in the rough terrain and the men kept stopping or slowing down to put him back on. Soldiers took turns holding his hand as they brought him to the CCP. While they waited for the helicopters, Murphy made his way to 3d platoon’s area, found Lieutenant Williams and told him there was no way 2d Platoon could assist him. Williams said his men were capable of evacuating their own wounded. Murphy then asked Williams if he had seen Staff Sergeant Newman, saying “I can’t find him.” Williams said he had not. His mission completed, Murphy returned to his platoon.⁹⁵

Approximately seven MEDEVAC helicopters circled above Makuan. At Lieutenant Williams’ position, Williams and Staff Sergeant Jackel spun chemical lights on strings, making a glowing propeller called a “buzz saw.” The pilots were taking things slow, not risking a mid-air collision by coming in too fast. At Lieutenant Murphy’s position, the first helicopter landed and the men rushed Lieutenant Yates to it. Specialist Babinski briefed the flight medic on Yates’ condition. As the Bravo men gathered other casualties, the flight medic jumped back into the helicopter as it took off. Yates was an emergency case and the crew wanted to get him to help quickly. When Prisock had difficulty contacting other Army MEDEVACs, his JTACs called in Air Force Pararescue Jumper helicopters. They landed at both Murphy and Williams’ positions and loaded the wounded Americans but the ANA were nowhere to be found. They had all left on foot.⁹⁶

At Lieutenant Murphy’s location, the men had finished loading the last wounded when Specialist Babinski brought Murphy a list of names of those

evacuated. Staff Sergeant Newman's name was not on the list. Someone suggested that Newman had walked back to the strong points. Sergeant McDonald could not raise Newman on the radio. "My initial worry was that he was hurt, couldn't defend himself, and [the enemy was] a lot closer to us than we imagined," he said.⁹⁷ The rest of the men returned to the blast site, seeking to avoid IEDs. They found Newman's ID card, pieces of his uniform, and his ammo pouch in a tree. They noticed a bloodstain on the mud wall about 20 meters from the blast site.⁹⁸

While Sergeant McDonald checked the other side of the wall, Lieutenant Murphy discovered Newman's body in a ditch. They deduced that the blast threw Newman backward into the wall, before he rolled forward into the ditch. It was Newman who flew past Captain Prisock's right side at the moment of the explosion.⁹⁹ The men put Newman into a body bag and placed it onto a litter. Four men, including Murphy, picked up the litter and carried it back to Strong Point One until Murphy asked the men if he could change hands, since he was holding the litter handle with his wounded hand. "We kind of felt like idiots for not remembering his wrist was all messed up," recalled Specialist Babinski. "But he didn't stop at all. He kept going."¹⁰⁰

During the search for Staff Sergeant Newman, Specialist Leigh became disoriented and dropped to a knee. He also had trouble breathing. As the men carried Newman's body back to Strong Point One, Leigh vomited. He told Captain Prisock he felt fine, trying to reassure his commander that he had not suffered a concussion, but his words were disjointed and confused. He vomited again.¹⁰¹ Other soldiers were doing the same, suffering the delayed effects of over-pressure sickness and traumatic brain injury (TBI). Soldiers from 1st Platoon arrived from Strong Point Two and brought the men all the way back to the canal bridge where they rendezvoused with an MRAP to bring them to the ANP station for treatment.¹⁰² As Leigh climbed into the MRAP, he turned to Captain Rella, "Well, at least I'm going to get my Purple Heart, Sir." Rella agreed.¹⁰³ In all, 26 American and ANA soldiers were evacuated that night.¹⁰⁴

First Sergeant Stone conducted an equipment check on all the Soldiers and discovered that Lieutenant Yates' Advanced Special Improvement Program (ASIP) radio was missing. Soldiers from Lieutenant Ragland's 1st Platoon relieved Murphy's 2d Platoon and searched for the radio, which could not be allowed to fall into enemy hands. After searching around the blast area, Ragland called for the engineers, who used APOBs to blast paths through the fields or knock down walls. "[We] saw the blood all over," said Lieutenant Ragland, "but [we] couldn't really find anything to

bring back.”¹⁰⁵ After almost an hour-long search, Captain Prisock decided the mission was not worth the risk and ordered the men to return.¹⁰⁶

Lieutenant Williams and the rest of his men finally arrived at Strong Point One after taking a circuitous route, making sure not to follow the same path they used on the way out. Everyone was checked for signs of hearing loss and TBI. Some were evacuated by trucks. Sergeant Gerwitz, now Lieutenant Murphy’s acting platoon sergeant, told his returning men to go sit by the fire. “Try to get warm,” he told them, “try to get some rest.”¹⁰⁷ Many men suffered from headaches and swollen limbs. Then word then reached the men that Yates had died. “They were shaken up,” said Lieutenant Ragland.¹⁰⁸ Some of the men removed equipment off Sergeant Newman’s body in preparation for the trip to the ANP station. The last piece they lifted was a document in several Afghan languages which began, “I am an American Soldier.”¹⁰⁹

Captain Prisock radioed Lieutenant Colonel Davis and the two officers agreed to bomb the area where Lieutenant Yates lost his radio. Now convinced that Makuan held no civilians, Davis changed the mission from clearing the town for an outpost to eliminating the settlement. They planned to hit the area with Guided-Multiple Launch Rocket System (G-MLRS) artillery. If Yates’ radio was still in the area, the G-MLRS would blast it to bits, along with any insurgents and IEDs.¹¹⁰

The next morning at sunrise, most of the men retreated into the strong points as 40 to 50 G-MLRS rockets flew over and exploded in the IED blast area. Prisock described the rockets flying overhead as “black telephone poles, just descending.”¹¹¹ “Everything was rock, rattle and shake,” said Staff Sergeant Roberts.¹¹² “It was pretty phenomenal,” added Lieutenant Murphy.¹¹³ Lieutenant Williams did not think so. The explosions woke him out of a dead sleep. “I’m scrambling,” said Williams, “I’m trying to grab my M4, my helmet, and I’m like ‘What’s going on? Not again!’” The explosion lifted the men’s spirits after a difficult operation. “It made their hearts happy,” said Staff Sergeant Roberts. “[It] made them feel better to have some sort of retaliation.”¹¹⁴

Within days, Bravo Company departed the area. Other elements of 1st Battalion, 502d IN moved in and leveled the remaining structures and destroyed additional tree lines. By the time they were done, they had, according to Staff Sergeant Jackel, “turned it into a parking lot.”¹¹⁵ When Sergeant McDonald returned to the town almost a week later with Alpha Company, he did not recognize the area. “From the time that I first saw it to when it was completely finished was pretty much night and

day,” said McDonald. “There was nothing there.”¹¹⁶ Makuan eventually became a combat outpost and never again supported enemy operations as a bed-down area, a bomb-producing facility, or a consolidation area for ambushes on Highway One. An objective of DRAGON STRIKE had been accomplished, but Bravo Company paid a heavy price to deprive Makuan from the enemy.¹¹⁷

Conclusion

Bravo Company overcame numerous obstacles to return Makuan to government control. The Soldiers used their training and assets to clear IEDs, destroy fighting positions, and eliminate IED-making facilities. “The threat was killing not only us, but the ANA, the ANP, and the local civilians,” explained Lieutenant Colonel Davis. When the operation ended, local farmers returned to the area south of Highway One and thanked the Soldiers, telling them “this area has been the Taliban’s area, we just wanted to be farmers again.”¹¹⁸

The Makuan operation also proved the utility of joint operations. The Marine Corps breached the IED belts south of Highway One. Navy Seabees worked on the front line to build (and rebuild) the bridge over the canal and Navy bomb-sniffing dogs added to the company’s capability. The Air Force provided combat air support, pararescue helicopters, JTACs, as well as bomb-sniffing dogs. Throughout the operation, the services collectively coordinated their efforts for the best possible result. Captain Prisock praised the joint effort, “Soldiers, Marines, Airmen, and Sailors alike constantly faced and overcame great danger, maintaining their composure and commitment to both the mission and one another,” he explained.¹¹⁹ Advanced weapons systems, such as MICLIC-firing ABVs and APOBs, also gave the Americans a distinct advantage over the enemy embedded in a safe haven that dated back to the Soviet-Afghan War.

Captain Prisock considered the destruction of the bridge on 15 September the key to the operation. If Bravo had kept the bridge intact, or had a portable bridge readily available, they would have been able to advance south faster, bringing in MRAPs and other heavy vehicles, and quickly push all the way down to the Arghandab River. They also would have had more daylight to identify and remove IEDs. As it was, Bravo ended up stalled at the bridge on the first day, giving the enemy time to recover and attack Lieutenant Ragland’s 1st Platoon, inflicting casualties.

Some of Bravo Company’s assets did not achieve the expected results. Most of the men grew distrustful of their bomb-sniffing dogs, feeling they only provided a false sense of security. The dogs got off to a poor

start when the MICLICs first breached the enemy line.¹²⁰ First Sergeant Stone explained that the dogs panicked every time an explosive detonated, adding “nobody really trusted them.”¹²¹ Lieutenant Williams thought both the dogs and their trainers were very professional, but the dogs could not handle the Afghan heat. The dog handlers would often tell him “He’s done, he’s not going to be very effective anymore.”¹²² Staff Sergeant Roberts saw some benefit, “I’m not going to walk out there without a dog if the dog is available.”¹²³ While the dogs had been trained to detect odors specific to IEDs, the enemy often masked those odors. In addition, the dog handlers found it difficult to read their dogs at night while wearing NVGs. This might explain why Blek failed to detect the IED in the staircase. Staff Sergeant Olson stressed that “there’s no odor in a pressure plate,” adding “I can’t say that I really saw anything in my dog that could have prevented it.”¹²⁴

Other factors proved a challenge to the Soldiers. Almost everyone in the company admitted how exhausted they were when DRAGON STRIKE kicked off, and they caught little sleep on the following days. “We had already been up for two days [prior to DRAGON STRIKE],” explained First Sergeant Stone.¹²⁵ “We were so run down, and just barely making it,” recalled Staff Sergeant Christensen.¹²⁶ Specialist Leigh remembered that exhaustion tested everyone. “We were running on no sleep, and bad food, and it tested the Soldiers probably more than [anything else].”¹²⁷ Most men stressed they were more fatigued on this operation than any other time in their military careers.¹²⁸

Bravo Company’s officers and NCOs agreed that going into a built-up area at night invited trouble. “We had seen the IEDs,” said Staff Sergeant Roberts, explaining that the enemy had already placed IEDs all over Makuan before they pulled out. “They go back and hook up the batteries before you come, so when you come through there, it’s hot, and at nighttime, you can’t see anything.”¹²⁹ Staff Sergeant Jackel called operations at night misguided. “That was one of my platoon’s tactics, techniques, and procedures. We don’t patrol at night,” he said.¹³⁰ Lieutenant Williams felt that it was easiest to spot IEDs visually, in daylight, where anything that looked odd usually revealed an IED. “[The enemy] kicks some rocks over [the IEDs] or a rock with a wire sticking out, because they know they don’t have all day to do it, so they got to rush.”¹³¹ First Sergeant Stone defended the night maneuver, despite the heavy IED infestation, “From a tactical viewpoint we knew that if we were going to catch them bedded down, the best time to do that was at night.”¹³²

Also, by operating during the day and returning to the strong points at night, the company allowed the enemy to reoccupy compounds previously cleared. The air assault originally planned for Makuan would have solved this problem by trapping the enemy between two forces. When Bravo instead attacked on the ground, the enemy was able to retreat and return. Staff Sergeant Heneghan explained the unit's frustration about revisiting areas already cleared the previous day. "We had already been down there... and they wanted us to go back down there again at this time, at night."¹³³

Bravo Company did have the benefit of excellent leadership. Captain Prisock commanded Bravo Company for only 10 days prior to DRAGON STRIKE, but he led from the front and shared his men's burdens. He called in the A-10s to destroy the bridge over the canal, brought support fire when Lieutenant Murphy engaged the enemy, and went out with Murphy's unit when the ANA Soldier stepped on the IED. He also made sure his men knew how to use any asset available to them, from fire support to heavy weapons. "We had the assets at the time and he wanted to make sure the soldiers knew how to employ those assets," explained First Sergeant Stone.¹³⁴ "That decision to place Brandon in [command of Bravo Company] was certainly the right decision," said Lieutenant Colonel Davis, "and he really... did well, Brandon Prisock took it to the next level." Prisock's lieutenants and NCOs also performed their duties despite wounds, little sleep, and a tenacious enemy.¹³⁵

Despite the hardships and delays, Bravo Company performed professionally and bravely, clearing IEDs and engaging the enemy. When Lieutenant Murphy and Sergeant Dodd were wounded, they stayed in the fight. During the subsequent battle, the men managed to reroute a MEDEVAC helicopter from inadvertently landing on the battlefield. During the first IED incident, every Soldier wanted to leave the strong points and help their comrades, and when the ANA panicked, the American Soldiers kept their composure and followed procedures. And despite the confusion of three IED blasts, First Sergeant Stone orchestrated three MASCALs and evacuated 26 casualties out of the area.

In clearing Makuan, the company suffered heavy casualties. Men were killed, others received severe wounds and even more suffered TBI. Yet they pressed on after the delay at the bridge and again following the firefights at the canal and Makuan. After the three IED explosions, they evacuated the wounded and searched for Lieutenant Yates' missing equipment. Prisock was proud of his men. "Without fail, everyone gave 100 percent," he said. "Their efforts and sacrifice counted."¹³⁶

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Gaining the Initiative in Musahi Using CERP to Disrupt the Taliban in Kabul Province

by

Anthony E. Carlson, Ph. D.

In October 2010, Taliban insurgents controlled the Musahi valley in east-central Afghanistan. Nestled between Logar Province to the south and the Afghan capital of Kabul to the north, the valley was a strategic Taliban corridor. Located 25 kilometers southeast of Kabul, the Musahi District had a population of 44,000 residents scattered throughout 22 villages.¹ Waging a ruthless campaign of intimidation and violence, the Taliban terrorized the Musahi population, established a string of weapons caches, assassinated and kidnapped members of the Afghan National Police (ANP), bribed local government officials, and detonated roadside improvised explosive devices (IEDs) throughout the valley. The Musahi ANP proved incapable of protecting the population or ending the Taliban's reign of terror. Outmanned, undersupplied, inexperienced, and crippled by desertions, the ANP seldom ventured away from their security checkpoints. As a result, the Taliban controlled the valley with little resistance. Eleven years after the US-led invasion of Afghanistan, the deteriorating security situation on the doorstep of the national capital defied simple solutions.²

In late 2010, the daunting task of professionalizing the valley's ANP fell to the Musahi Police Mentor Team (PMT). Under the direction of First Lieutenant Dennis Frey, Jr., the PMT, comprised of 13 Soldiers from the Nebraska Army National Guard's Alpha Troop, 1st Squadron, 134th Cavalry Regiment (A/1-134 CAV), arrived at Camp Dubbs in Kabul in November and assessed Musahi's grave security situation. Frey decided to launch a large-scale humanitarian aid (HA) mission funded by the Commander's Emergency Response Program (CERP). A Department of Defense (DOD) program, CERP distributed humanitarian and reconstruction money to US military commanders with minimal bureaucratic interference. Although CERP generally provided support to humanitarian and reconstruction initiatives, Frey expanded the program's role in Musahi. The objective of his CERP-funded HA mission was twofold. First, Frey hoped that a surge of humanitarian and medical assistance might win the hearts and minds of Musahi residents and turn them against the Taliban. Second, given the PMT's limited manpower, the HA deliveries required the participation of ANP personnel. Frey thus envisioned the HA deliveries as on-the-job