

By Nick Watts, Great North News Services

16 Air Assault Brigade has just completed its tour in Helmand; in what the MOD call Op Herrick 13. It was the first formation to deploy under the new regime on Op Herrick 1 in 2006; it subsequently returned in 2008 and again in 2010. Plenty to reflect on compared with previous tours. General Petraeus commander of NATO's ISAF was recently in London presenting the big strategic picture, so this presentation was a useful counterpoint from the operational level.

Brigadier James Chiswell MC gave a presentation at MOD on Wednesday on the results of the tour. His principal reflection seemed to be that the way ISAF is now operating in Helmand province is putting pressure on the Taliban. Compared to its last deployment in 2008, 16 Brigade was now operating in a more concentrated area. In 2008 there were 6-7,000 ISAF troops in Helmand; now there are 30,000. This is the result of the surge which was so hotly debated in Washington. From the UK forces perspective this not only means a more manageable area of responsibility (AOR) to control, but it also frees one rifle company equivalent for manoeuvre for each battle group. This generates greater flexibility.

Technical developments also enable a more focused effort on removing the middle layers of command from the Taliban. Progress in training of the Afghan National Army (ANA), which has been reported on before, is having an effect as well. The emphasis on operations is to follow the clear, hold and build doctrine. This means ISAF troops clear the area of Taliban and ANA forces along with the Afghan National Police (ANP) then hold the ground. This enables the UK forces to re-deploy to other areas. Lt Col Colin Weir CO of 1 Royal Irish battle group explained how it took his battle group, along with the ANA, one month to shape and execute an operation to clear Taliban from an area known as the Red Wedge near to Zarghan Kalay.

As part of the Clear, Hold, Build concept the central role played by the ANA was repeatedly demonstrated during this briefing. In the Afghan context the idea of winning hearts and minds is translated into instilling confidence in the minds of the locals. It is apparent that the Taliban only hold sway through intimidation. This is sometimes combined with cultural ties where a tribal elder will instruct some of the young men of the village to join the Taliban to fulfill some obligation or other. Breaking this cycle is now a central part of ISAF's effort. Alongside the ISAF operation comes the re-construction and development which has long been recommended by many commentators. In addition the local Afghan governors and representatives of central government ministries visit to see what the villagers need. This combination now means that Afghan government agencies and forces now control most of the populated areas of Helmand province.

The job is still not done, however. There still remains the question of the poppy cultivation and the Taliban have not yet entirely gone away. In his March presentation Petraeus described Afghanistan as "all hard all of the time." This was borne out by the 19 fatalities 16 Brigade suffered during their tour. The expectation is that the Taliban will be forced to adopt yet more asymmetric style attacks to maintain their hold over those areas they still control. In his London presentation in October 2009 General McChrystal, the previous ISAF commander, spoke of

COIN math. By this he meant the calculations which had hitherto obtained in counter insurgency operations no longer held. He believed that everything ISAF did had some effect on the calculations in the minds of the locals. Lessons are being learnt and applied. 3 Commando Brigade now take up the task in Op Herrick 14; their progress will be interesting to observe.