

Hundreds of ISAF coalition troops have attacked a network of narcotics labs in the Sangin valley in Afghanistan as part of a substantial air assault which saw them seize a large amount of opium and kill a number of insurgents.

Eighteen UK, US and Australian helicopters carrying 300 soldiers from The 3rd Battalion The Royal Regiment of Scotland, accompanied by Afghan troops, dropped into the Taliban held area just after nightfall on 7 August 2009.

The collection of nine Chinooks, four Apache attack helicopters, three Black Hawk and two Sea King helicopters flew over the targeted compounds situated in a vast expanse of open desert, before launching an assault into the area to clear it of suspected Taliban fighters.

Moving into the heart of Malmal Chinah, close to Ghowrak in the Sangin Valley, they launched an attack on a series of compounds moving several narcotics processing rooms. Using sniffer dogs they pinpointed and seized about 250 kilograms of wet opium.

As they pushed east into a second compound they were engaged by Taliban fighters. The troops returned fire, drawn into a short but fierce fight through the maze of rooms in the mud compounds.

Explosive experts then began to work their way through compounds by blasting holes in the walls to allow the soldiers to move into the area. It is thought that seven insurgents were killed during the subsequent fighting.

By dawn, the troops had extracted from the compounds to the makeshift helicopter landing site in the desert, from where the fleet of helicopters took them back to their base in Kandahar.

Major Robin Lindsay, 37, from Perth who is from The 3rd Battalion The Royal Regiment of Scotland led the operation. He said: "This was a highly successful operation. This type of high intensity technique, where we airlift a large number of troops into a small area, effectively storming it, has been shown to work time after time.

"It proves to the Taliban beyond doubt that they have no safe havens even in the most remote, isolated places. We can hit them at will wherever and whoever they are. There are no out-of-bounds areas for ISAF troops.

"This air assault highlights the truly multi-national nature of operations in Afghanistan. Notably, we were accompanied by quite a number of our Afghan counterparts and the success of the operation is also testament to their effectiveness. They are committed, professional and brave; a true force to be reckoned with.

"The money that would have come from the sale of the opium would undoubtedly have funded the insurgents' activities, further strengthening their hold in the area and their ability to launch deadly attacks on coalition forces. This kind of operation hits at the heart of the insurgency because it significantly reduces their capability to continue the fight. With fewer numbers and diminished resources, they are simply less effective."

Although 3 SCOTS are part of 19 Light Brigade who currently make up Task Force Helmand they are also responsible for supporting a variety of operations across the whole of southern Afghanistan, not just those of the main UK Task Force in Helmand province, but also on ISAF operations.

It is unclear as to the exact burden sharing of the helicopters used in the operation, which would have been useful to know especially in light of allegations of too few British helicopters in theatre, but all the MoD press office would provide was the following statement

"We will check with our colleagues in theatre as to whether a breakdown can be provided, however, this would be information coming from central ISAF not the UK necessarily as we operate a joint pool of helicopters, therefore, it is unlikely that a swift answer will be forthcoming."

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