Improving in War: Military Adaptation and the British in Helmand, 2006-2009

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ABSTRACT

War disciplines militaries: it forces them to refine, and sometimes revise, their tactics, techniques and technologies, or risk defeat in battle. Yet there is no theory of how militaries improve in war. This article develops a theory of military adaptation, which it applies to an analysis of the British campaign in Helmand from 2006-2009. Drawing on a wealth of primary sources (military plans, post operational reports and interviews), it shows how British brigades adapted different ways of using combat power to try and defeat the Taliban from 2006-2007, and how from late 2007, British brigades have adapted a new population-centric approach that has focused more on influence operations and non-kinetic activities.

How do militaries improve operational performance in war? Improvements may involve major organisational change. But equally, they may involve only minor change to how militaries operate, or indeed no change at all (just better implementation of existing organisational routines). Up to now, the scholarly literature has focused on the imperatives and processes of major military change, i.e., military innovation.[1] But innovation is neither a necessary or sufficient condition for victory in war. What victory almost certainly requires is for militaries to adapt to the operational environment and

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[1] Theo Farrell and Terry Terriff (eds) *The Sources of Military Change* (Lynne Rienner, 2002); Adam Grissom, "The Future of Military Innovation Studies," *Journal of Strategic Studies* 29/5 (2006), 905-34.

challenges they face, both when they first deploy and as the campaign evolves. This article develops a theory of military adaptation, which it applies to an analysis of the British campaign in Helmand from 2006-2009. It shows how British brigades adapted different ways of using combat power to try and defeat the Taliban from 2006-2007, and how from late 2007, British brigades have adapted a new population-centric approach that has focused more on influence operations and non-kinetic activities.

Military Adaptation

It is entirely understandable that scholars in strategic studies should have concentrated on explaining military innovation.[2] Change on such scale can have significant implications for national force structure and the defence budget, as well as on the balance of power and the offense-defense balance between states. By comparison, tinkering with tactics, techniques and technologies seems far less significant. And yet often it is such tinkering that aids victory in battle and contributes to success in war. Refinements to U.S. tactics, techniques and procedures (TTPs) for roadblocks in Iraq suggest the importance of small tactical changes to the success of a military campaign.[3]

In his seminal book, *Winning the Next War*, Stephen Rosen defines military innovation in terms of big change – i.e., a new way of fighting or a whole new combat arm. Rosen distinguishes between peacetime, wartime and technological innovation. Rosen argues that peacetime innovation involves a top-down campaign of military change led by a visionary military leader. He also presents wartime innovation as mostly involving top-down change to re-align military operations and strategic goals. Finally, for Rosen, technological innovation centres on the management of risk and

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[2] There are numerous studies by historians of tactical change, especially by armies in the field. But historians have yet to suggest a theory of military adaptation. See, for example, Paddy Griffiths, *Battle Tactics on the Western Front: The British Army's Art of Attack, 1916-18* (Yale, NH: Yale University Press, 1994); and Michael D. Doubler, *Closing with the Enemy: How GIs Fought the War in Europe, 1944-1945* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1994).

[3] Colin H. Kahl, "In the Crossfire or the Crosshairs? Norms, Civilian Casualties, and U.S. Conduct in Iraq," *International Security* 32/1 (2007), 27-28.

uncertainty both concerning enemy technologies, and the cost and potential of new technologies.[4]

Rosen is not alone in concentrating on top-down change; most works on military innovation do so.

Indeed the main debate in the literature is over rival models of top-down (military versus civilian led)

innovation.[5] Rosen's typology, whilst analytically useful, disguises the reality of innovation that often

stretches across periods of peace and war, and usually involves some new technology. Indeed, the

peacetime innovations examined by Rosen – amphibious, carrier, and airmobile warfare – were all

refined in war.[6] And today what we have seen with the U.S. military is a broad-based programme of

force transformation which self-consciously involves technological, organizational and doctrinal

innovation to develop capacities for network-centric and effects-based operations.[7]

Unlike Rosen, this article focuses on how militaries seek to win the "current war". For this,

we need a theory able to explain bottom-up change by organisations at war.[8] In other words, we need

a theory of military adaptation. Military adaptation is here defined as change to tactics, techniques or

existing technologies to improve operational performance. In contrast, I understand military

innovation to be a major change that is *institutionalised* in new doctrine, a new organisational structure

and/or a new technology. Hence, whilst innovation can occur rapidly (i.e., revolutionary innovation),

it more often occurs over a long period (i.e., evolutionary innovation).[9] Of course, adaptation may

lead to innovation: new tactics or techniques may in time be captured in doctrine, or lead to a change

to organisational structure or the acquisition of a new enabling technology.

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[4] Stephen Peter Rosen, *Winning the Next War: Innovation and the Modern Military* (Cornell University Press, 1991).

[5] The rival models are provided by Stephen Rosen (military led) and Barry Posen (civilian led). Rosen, *Winning the Next War*; Barry R. Posen, *The Sources of Military Doctrine: France, Britain, and Germany Between the World Wars* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1984). For studies which provide top down models that emphasise civil-military interaction, see Deborah D. Avant, *Political Institutions and Military Change: Lessons from Peripheral Wars* (Cornell University Press, 1994); Elizabeth Kier, *Imagining War: French and British Military Doctrine Between the Wars* (Princeton University Press, 1997); Peter Trubowitz, Emily O. Goldman, and Edward Rhodes (eds.), *The Politics of Strategic Adjustment: Ideas, Institutions, and Interests* (Columbia University Press, 1999).

[6] See chapters on these innovations in Williamson Murray and Allan R. Millet (eds.) *Military Innovation in the Interwar Period* (Cambridge University Press, 1996).

[7] Frans Osinga, "Military Transformation: an Introduction," in Terry Terriff, Frans Osinga, and Theo Farrell (eds), *A Transformation Gap? American Innovations and European Military Change* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, forthcoming 2010).

[8] This is noted in Eliot A. Cohen, "Change and Transformation in Military Affairs," *Journal of Strategic Studies* 27/3 (2004), 400-401; Grissom, "The Future of Military Innovation Studies," pp. 920-24.

[9] Williamson Murray, "Innovation: Past and Future," in Murray and Millet (eds.) *Military Innovation*, 306-310.

My theory of adaptation recognises military organisations to be both rational and routine-bound. They are rational in that they monitor their performance and their environment, and respond to under-performance and environmental change. But they are bound by routines in that *how* they measure performance and perceive their environment, and *how* they generate and select appropriate responses.[10] Routine is generically used here to mean organisational norms, rules and procedures, which are codified in organisational rulebooks, doctrine, and training, and frame organisational perception, decisions, and action.[11]

Military organisations can adapt in two ways to underperformance and environmental change. First, they can *exploit* core competencies in refining or modifying existing tactics, techniques and/or technologies. Second, they can *explore* new capacities by developing new modes and means of operations.[12] Where exploration involves doctrinal or structural change, or the acquisition of a brand new technology, it crosses the threshold into innovation. Exploration may involve adaptive change that is below the innovation threshold where, for instance, it involves new tactics or techniques developed in the battlefield but not institutionalised in doctrine or structural change. Similarly, exploration might involve new uses of existing technologies, or indeed the introduction of a mature technology that is new to the organisation, but itself hardly innovative.[13]

Rationality and routines lead militaries to favour exploitation over exploration. First, militaries must balance the need to master the tactics, techniques and technologies to sustain core war-fighting competencies. Without the repetition in training, exercises, and operations, these core competencies can quickly deteriorate with the risk of defeat in battle.[14] Yet such routine and

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[10] W. Richard Scott, "Symbols and Organizations: From Barnard to the Institutionalists," in Oliver E. Wiliamson (ed), *Organization Theory: From Chester Barnard to the Present and Beyond* (Oxford University Press, 1995), 38-55.
[11] For studies on how routines frame the perceptions, decisions and actions of military organisations, see Lynn Eden, *Whole World on Fire: Organizations, Knowledge, and Nuclear Weapons Devastation* (Cornell University Press, 2004); Isabel V. Hull, *Absolute Destruction: Military Culture and Practices of War in Imperial Germany* (Cornell University Press, 2005).
[12] James G. March, "Introduction", in March (ed.), *The Pursuit of Organizational Intelligence* (Blackwell, 1999), p.5.
[13] On the enduring, everyday importance of "old" technology, see David Edgerton, *The Shock of the Old: Technology and Global History since 1900* (Profile Books, 2006).
[14] For a recent articulation of this argument, see Gian P. Gentile, "Learning, Adapting and the Perils of the New Counter-insurgency," *Survival*, 51/6 (2010), 189-92.

repetition retard the inclination and ability to explore new ways of doing things.[15] Second, exploration may threaten existing ways of war in which militaries have heavily invested, and around which have developed sub-community interests and culture.[16] Third, militaries have good reason to favour tried and tested ways of doing things, and to be sceptical of the newfangled, because war is so unforgiving of failure.[17] The concept of "competency trap" nicely captures the problem: given sunken costs, organisational routines, and vested interests, militaries find it very difficult to abandon that which they have become good at.[18]

Eventually, however, organisations must explore new ways of operating or they risk being overtaken by competitors and environmental changes. So when do military organisations cease exploiting and start exploring? Most obviously, when they really have to. That is to say, when they are at war and appear to be losing. The military innovation literature highlights the importance of prospective defeat as a trigger of change.[19] This raises the question of what constitutes prospective defeat? The answer is bound to be context specific, and involve a mix of material indicators (e.g., relative rates of force attrition, civilian losses, and economic and infrastructural damage) and perception (e.g., national morale as reported in media and recorded in opinion polls). Since military adaptation involves bottom-up change, then it is reasonable to infer that battlefield indicators and military perceptions will be most significant in triggering a shift to exploration. The military innovation literature also highlights the role of military entrepreneurs, who champion innovations from a position of authority within their organisation, or who do so outside the organisation and with the support of civilian leaders. These two triggers can work in synergy. The experience or prospect of defeat can create the permissive conditions for military innovation by discrediting old

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[15] Barbara Levitt and James G. March, "Chester I. Barnard and the Intelligence of Learning," in Williamson (ed), *Organization Theory*, 28.

[16] Carl H. Builder, *The Masks of War: American Military Styles in Strategy and Analysis* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1989).

[17] Organizational mistakes and catastrophic military failure is explored in Eliot A. Cohen and John Gooch, *Military Misfortunes: The Anatomy of Failure in War* (New York: The Free Press, 1990).

[18] James G. March and Barbara Levitt, "Organizational Learning," in March (ed), *Pursuit*, 78-9.

[19] Posen, *Sources*, 57; Avant, *Political Institutions*, xx.

means and modes of operations.[20] When it comes to innovation, there is evidence to suggest that entrepreneurial leadership is often not enough either; even military chiefs, who have the vision and authority to affect great military change, can be unsuccessful. The organisation must recognise that it has suffered a catastrophic failure, or at least be made to see that it risks doing so.[21] However, we may reasonably expect that adaptation, even explorative, is easier for a military to contemplate and undertake than innovation because it does not require *institutional* change. New tactics and techniques that are adopted may be readily abandoned when the need for them has passed. Thus, we may infer that the risk and scale of defeat may not have to be as stark for exploration as for innovation. Equally, entrepreneurs may not require the urgency of defeat to see their new ideas put into practice.

Organisation theory further suggests three *enabling* factors for exploration. First is poor organisational memory. Organisational routines are encoded and transmitted through organisational memory. For military organisations, memory is stored in doctrine, lessons-learned processes, and training. Good memory facilitates exploitation of core competencies; effective doctrine, lessons-learning, and training all contribute to the recall and appropriate application of core routines.[22] In contrast, poor memory facilitates exploration by reducing the efficiency with which organisations recover and transmit core competencies. Poor memory also reduces the tendency of organisations to prematurely abandon new alternatives. This is a natural tendency, since organisations are intolerant of failure and most new ideas fail. But some new ideas, with refinement (in content or execution), can prove effective. As two prominent organisation theorists note: "If failures are remembered poorly...an alternative that is initially unsuccessful can overcome its bad reputation."[23] The second

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[20] Posen, *Sources of Military Doctrine*; Emily O. Goldman, "International Competition and Military Effectiveness: Naval Air Power, 1919-1945," in Risa Brooks and Elizabeth A. Stanley (eds.), *Creating Military Power: The Sources of Military Effectiveness* (Stanford University Press, 2007), 158-85; Joao Resende-Santos, *Neorealism, States and the Modern Mass Army* (Cambridge University Press, 2007).

[21] Terry Terriff, "Warriors and Innovators: Military Change and Organizational Culture in the US Marine Corps," *Defence Studies* 6/2 (2006), 215-47.

[22] March and Levitt, "Organizational Learning," 83-6.

[23] Jerker Denrell and James G. March, "Adaptation as Information Restriction: The Hot Stove Effect," in James G. March (ed), *Explorations in Organizations* (Stanford University Press, 2008), 139.

enabling factor is the degree of centralisation in the organisation. Centrally controlled organisations are efficient at exploitation, because they can allocate resources as necessary to sustain a sufficient repertoire of competencies, and ensure adequate application of competencies in operations. Decentralised organisations, where authority and a degree of autonomy are delegated to component units, are less efficient at the management of core competencies. But they are also more sensitive to changes in their local environmental. These two characteristics, less focused on centrally managed competencies and more focused on local conditions, make decentralised organisations more inclined to explore new alternatives.[24] The third factor is personnel turnover. Ideas travel with people. Organisations can loose old knowledge when people leave. At the same time, people can bring fresh ideas and perspectives with them when they join organisations.[25] This effect is most pronounced at the top; hence struggling businesses often try to turn things around by replacing their chief executives.

The British Campaign in Helmand, 2006-2009

The British military campaign in Helmand from mid 2006 to mid 2009 evolved from one centred on hard military power and directed at destroying the Taliban, to one focused on generating "soft effects" and securing the civilian population. Over this period, no less than six British task forces deployed to Helmand, each one based around a brigade (with augmented units) serving a six month tour. In the initial phase of the campaign, from May 2006 to September 2007, three successive British brigades engaged in major combat operations against the Taliban. These brigades struggled with a campaign that was under-resourced and under intense operational and political pressure. They each responded by exploiting their own core competences in combined arms warfare.[26] In September

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[24] Alexander Cooley, *Logics of Hierarchy: The Organization of Empires, States, and Military Occupations* (Cornell University Press, 2005), 45.

[25] March, *Pursuit*, 124-6.

[26] Stephen Biddle sees this set of core competencies as constituting the "modern military system." See Biddle, *Military Power: Explaining Victory and Defeat in Modern Battle* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2004).

2007, the fourth British task force arrived in Helmand with a new population-centric approach, which led it to explore and develop new capabilities. Thereafter, the British campaign entered a second phase where the main effort has involved consolidation of this new approach focusing on influence operations rather than combat operations, and directed towards securing and developing key areas of Helmand.

Exploiting Old Ways of War

When the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation decided to expand the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) to Southern Afghanistan, Britain agreed to take responsibility for Helmand. As it transpired, this was to be the most challenging province to stabilize in Afghanistan, given the scale and reach of the narco-economy, the level of corruption in public life, the degree of local support for the Taliban, and the extent of under-development especially in terms of infrastructure.[27] This new campaign was a stretch for a small army which had 8,500 troops deployed in Iraq in 2005-2006.[28] The British Army then stood at 101,000, with seven deployable brigades. In addition, the Royal Marines also had a deployable brigade: 3 Commando Brigade.[29] The heavy and medium brigades were all committed to the Iraq campaign. Accordingly the Army's elite light brigade, 16 Air Assault Brigade, was selected to provide the first British task force for Helmand, with 3 Commando Brigade to follow in the second tour.

However, the Ministry of Defence (MOD) decided to cap the UK task force at 3,150 troops; in other words, only a half brigade in strength. Its primary job was to protect the Provincial Reconstruction Team (PRT) and to create security in the key ground between and surrounding the provincial capital of Lashkar Gah and the main economic town of Gereskh. PRTs are the primary

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[27] Theo Farrell and Stuart Gordon, "COIN Machine: the British Military in Afghanistan," *Orbis* 53/4 (2009), 667-9.

[28] In fact, the commitment of the task force to Southern Afghanistan was to breach British Defence Planning Assumptions; British defence chiefs were anticipating a drawdown of UK forces in Iraq which would release assets for deployment to Helmand. Testimony of General The Lord Walker (Chief of the Defence Staff, 2003-06) to the Iraq Inquiry, 1 February 2010, 55-7, at http://www.iraqinquiry.org.uk/transcripts/oralevidence-bywitness.aspx

[29] Sean Rayment, *Into the Killing Zone* (London: Constable, 2008), 33.

vehicles for stabilisation and reconstruction in Afghanistan (there are currently 25 PRTs in Afghanistan). The British were taking over from a small US PRT in Helmand: the British PRT was staffed by a handful of civilians from the Stabilisation Unit, the Foreign Office, and the Department for International Trade. The UK's Permanent Joint Headquarters (PJHQ), at Northwood, deployed an advanced planning team to Afghanistan in November 2005. The lack of a significant ISAF presence in Helmand meant that there was little overt military action by the Taliban at the time, and this appears to have led PJHQ to underestimate the threat facing the British task force.[30] Given this, PJHQ decided to deploy the task force in company-sized parcels. When initial elements of the British force encountered stiff resistance from the Taliban, it was decided to accelerate the deployment and send an additional 1,500 troops. However, these measures were too little, too late. It still took three months for the task force to deploy in full, and hence it lost important momentum in its break-in battle.[31]

Under pressure from the British government, the corrupt governor of Helmand, Sher Mohammed Akhunzada, had been replaced by Afghan President Karzai with a technocrat, Mohammed Daoud. Daoud failed to understand that the task force contained only one battlegroup of deployable infantry (namely 3 PARA battalion). Accordingly, he put pressure on the British to deploy forces to garrison towns in Northern Helmand that were vulnerable to Taliban attack. The British task force commander appreciated the political imperative to support Daoud in this situation. Thus the small British task force came to be stretched very thinly under a "platoon house" strategy that saw the British garrison the towns of Sangin, Musa Qaleh and Now Zad. Moreover, the British garrisons promptly came under siege from Taliban forces, and British forces found themselves locked in a series of major battles. In the end, Now Zad and Musa Qaleh became so difficult to re-

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[30] This was an extraordinary intelligence failure, especially as the US Ambassador in Kabul and the Commander of Combined Forces Command, Afghanistan, were both warning of a rising insurgency in 2006 and predicting that the Taliban would "strike hard before NATO could become well established on the ground" in the South. Ronald E. Newmann, *The Other War* (Washington, D.C.: Potomac Books, 2009), 52.

[31] Patrick Bishop, *3 Para: Afghanistan, Summer 2006* (London: HarperPress, 2007), 34-6; Rayment, *Into the Killing Zone*, 37-40; Col. Stuart Tootal, *Danger Close: Commanding 3 PARA in Afghanistan* (London: John Murray, 2009), 23-4, 47.

supply (requiring very dangerous helicopter missions), that 16 Brigade eventually had to abandon these towns. Woefully under-resourced, the British task force truly found itself between a rock and a hard place. British commanders had little choice but to accede to Daoud's requests for military assistance, especially as they came under pressure from Karzai and from Whitehall to do so. At the same time, they came under fire from the US head of Regional Command (South) (RC(S)), Major General Ben Freakley, because with practically the entire British task force defending towns from Taliban attack, the British could contribute little to support the RC (South) scheme of manoeuvre.[32] In its post operation report, 16 Brigade argued that the platoon house strategy had "undoubtedly contributed to the attrition of Taliban forces." However, 16 Brigade also recognised that since "the focus of 3 PARA battlegroup's activity was on the delivery of kinetic effect…the availability of assets to support non-kinetic and PRT activities was therefore limited."[33]

In October 2006, 3 Commando Brigade took over from 16 Brigade with a very different concept of operations (CONOPS). The Royal Marines were also focused on the economic and political centre of Helmand, which was designated an Afghan Development Zone (ADZ). But the Marines adopted a very different approach which ironically took the focus of their activities outside the ADZ. 3 Brigade had been observing the problems with the Platoon House strategy, which had fixed British forces and prevented them from supporting development activities. The new task force commander, Brigadier Jerry Thomas, declared "reconstruction of the ADZ" to be his main military effort. However, given the dire security situation, Brig. Thomas determined that "security represents the current pre-eminent line of activity" and that "once our security is in place, development will gather momentum and provide the best tool with which to counter this insurgency."[34] For the security line of operation, Thomas intended to "unfix the North" and "manoeuvre to threaten,

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[32] James Fergusson, *A Million Bullets* (Bantham Press, 2008), pp. 164-5; Bishop, *3 Para*, pp. 49-50, 147-8, 178-9.
[33] POR, UKTF/3005/H4, 19 Oct 2006.
[34] POR, UKTF/H5, 11 April 2007, 2-0-4, para.s 2 and 3.

disrupt and interdict the enemy."[35] To this end, 3 Brigade created a number of Mobile Operations

Groups (MOGs) – 250 strong flying columns in forty vehicles (a mix of Vikings and Land Rovers) –

which were tasked with seeking out and engaging the Taliban. Here the Royal Marines were drawing

on their core competency in conceiving of the "desert as a sea", through which MOGs could roam

wide and hunt down the enemy. However, the Taliban proved too wily to be drawn by the MOGs

into prepared kill zones and often as not the MOGs ended up engaging the Taliban on their terms.

Indeed, this led Royal Marines to coin the term "advance to ambush" to describe MOG operations.[36]

3 Brigade went into Helmand with the right intent. Influence was to be at the centre of their

CONOPS. The brigade intended to "tread softly", only escalating to violence as required and with

due care to minimize collateral damage so as to "avoid breeding new enemies." 3 Brigade's

Operational Design correctly noted "[a]lmost all tactical engagements (win or lose) favour the enemy.

By definition, they demonstrate instability and insecurity thus undermining perceptions of

Government of Afghanistan influence, control, and credibility." However, fighting in Helmand

escalated under 3 Brigade. The total number of engagements with enemy forces went up from 537

under 16 Brigade's tour, to 821 under 3 Brigade's tour.[37]

In its post operation report, 3 Brigade claims to have thrown the Taliban off-balance: "The

'dynamic unpredictability' arising from being able to engage the enemy at times and places of our

choosing has disrupted him, undermined his will and shattered his unity." It is clear that the Royal

Marines were more successful at taking the fight to the enemy than 16 Brigade had been: under 3

Brigade, there was a fourfold increase in the number of engagements initiated by British forces (up to

almost 300 engagements). However, as noted earlier, evidence from the field suggests that many of

these engagements were actually at a place of the enemy's choosing. Moreover, the brigade that

followed found Taliban will and unity to be far from "shattered." The larger point is that 3 Brigade

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[35] POR, H5, 2-0-4, para. 14.

[36] Ewen Southby-Tailyour, *Helmand, Afghanistan* (Ebury Press, 2008), 77-8

[37] POR, H5, 2-0-3.

never managed to create the security necessary to allow stabilization and development to proceed. The MOGs mostly operated outside the ADZ. This had some effect in keeping the Taliban at bay, resulting in a 45% reduction in attacks on British bases guarding district centres. But it also reduced the presence and hence enduring security effect of 3 Brigade within the ADZ.[38]

16 and 3 brigades are both specialist, high-readiness brigades. With the deployment of 12 Mechanised Brigade in April 2007, Britain committed one of its regular line brigades. 12 Mechanised was more heavily equipped than its predecessors: it deployed with the new Mastiff blast-proof vehicles, two GMLRS (Guided Multiple Rocket Launch System) batteries, and an armoured infantry company equipped with Warrior fighting vehicles. 12 Brigade realised that the mobile operations of 3 Commando Brigade were having no enduring effect. They appreciated that areas cleared of Taliban had to be held by British forces, in order to prevent the Taliban from simply returning. According, 12 Brigade established a number of patrol bases from which to conduct operations against the Taliban and also, crucially, to demonstrate "enduring presence."[39] This CONOPS was effectively a return to the original UK Joint Plan for Helmand, which was produced in late 2005 and early 2006 by PJHQ, working with civilian agency partners (the Foreign Office, the Department for International Development, and the Stabilisation unit). Indeed, whereas Brigadier Butler felt cut out from the drafting of the Joint Plan for Helmand which he had been given to implement, the commander of 12 Brigade, Brigadier John Lorimer, had been on the PJHQ team that drafted it. At the heart of the Joint Helmand Plan was an "ink-spot strategy" to steadily extend security bubbles from the key towns of Gereshk and Lashkar Gah. 12 Brigade focused on the ground between these district centres, as well as along the upper Sagin valley, with the intention of "expand[ing] the

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[38] POR, H5, 2-0-3, 2-4-1, 2-4-2
[39] POR, TFH/H6/1513/22, 19 October 2007, 7.

relatively secure zones around various towns and district centres to create a contiguous corridor of security between Lashkar Gah and Kajaki" (in Northern Helmand).[40]

However, 12 Brigade ended up pursuing an attrition campaign against the Taliban. This is because in executing its CONOPS, 12 Brigade focused on its core competencies, namely mechanized warfare. It sought to secure the ground between Lashkar Gah, Gereshk, and Sangin through a series of major "clearance operations." Over the course of its tour, 12 Brigade conducted five all-arms operations involving the whole task force. These involved pitched battles which the Taliban lost with an ever-rising body count. Thus, there was a further escalation in fighting under 12 Brigade, with the number of engagements with enemy forces rising from 821 under 3 Brigade to 1,096 under 12 Brigade.[41] Despite this, and indeed the emphasis on enduring presence in 12 Brigade's CONOPS, territory was not held after each major clearance operation and so the Taliban were able to return once the British had departed. The lack of real progress led a frustrated Brigadier Lorimer to reflect that it felt rather like "mowing the lawn."[42]

Exploring a New Way of War

The military campaign changed direction with 52 Infantry Brigade in October 2007. The incoming brigade's CONOPS was "clear, hold, build." In contrast, 12 Brigade had done little actual holding and no building. Moreover, 52 Brigade's Operational Design conceptualized the campaign centre of gravity in terms of the local population instead of the enemy's will and ability to fight. Indeed, for the new task force commander, Brigadier Andrew Mackay, the Taliban body count was a "corrupt measure of success."[43] Accordingly, 52 Brigade's campaign focused on influence operations to win the consent of the population. Hence, whereas 12 Brigade rotated units through its FOBs, 52

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[40] POR Op HERRICK 6, 2.
[41] POR Op HERRICK 6, 2.
[42] Stephen Grey, *Operation Snakebite* (Viking, 2009), 61-5
[43] Commander British Forces, Op HERRICK 7, "Counterinsurgency in Helmand, Task Force Operational Design," TFH/COMD/DO7, 1 January 2008, 2

Brigade committed units to FOBs for the entire tour in order to "provide reassurance and provide clear proof that our presence is not transient or temporary."[44] For the same reason, 52 Brigade also dismantled one FOB that was in a non-populated area, and built two new FOBs inside the Green Zone.[45] As the brigade plans officer noted, the position of FOBs was important "to establish[ing] a pattern of life locally." He also observed how "locals had something of a 'castle of the hill' mentality" and that by having an enduring presence, "locals would begin to engage the British and provide information."[46]

Thus, influence operations were absolutely central to 52 Brigade's campaign. Previous brigades had not ignored influence operations. But they had not given it the same prominence in their operational design, nor resourced it to the level as in 52 Brigade. 52 Brigade had more officers working on influence operations than its predecessors in task force HQ, and Brigadier Mackay also appointed dedicated influence officers in each of his battlegroup HQs.[47] Furthermore, 52 Brigade developed new capabilities for influence operations. Two new capabilities stand out. One was the creation of teams that were tasked with helping to develop, deliver and assess non-kinetic effects and influence operations; this included two-man Non-Kinetic Effects Teams (NKETs) which were deployed down to company level, and larger (up to 20 strong) Development and Influence Teams (DITs) which provide a deployable task force asset.[48] The second new capability was the Tactical Conflict Assessment Framework (TCAF). This was a diagnostic methodology to identity the causes of instability in a unit's area of operations. It essentially involved patrols asking local people a set of four questions about the issues that most concerned them.[49] Multiple and iterative questionnaires were use to identity local level trends and priorities, and his data was used to target appropriate

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[44] Annex A to COMD/DO 7, DTD, 1 January 2008, para. 8.
[45] The Green Zone is the belt of fertile ground, between 1 and 5 miles wide, that runs the length of the Helmand River all the way from Kajaki in the North to Kanashin in the South. The population in Helmand is concentrated in this area.
[46] Author interview with Major Geoff Minton, 52 Brigade HQ, Redford Cavalry Barracks, Edinburgh, 29 June 2009.
[47] Mackay, "Making," 12.
[48] Author's telephone interview with Brig. Andrew Mackay, Comd 52 Bde, 23 April 2008.
[49] Q1: Have there been changes in the village population and why? Q2: What are the most important problems facing the village? Q3: Who do you believe can solve your problems? Q4: What should be done first?

development and stabilization activities. Follow-up TCAF questionnaires were used to measure the effectiveness of these activities.[50] As one officer observed, TCAF "was not a non-kinetic silver bullet." A trial of TCAF in Lashkar Gah appeared to show very positive results in terms of gathering intelligence to target non-kinetic activities. However, this may have created unrealistic expectations in the task force headquarters, and it would appear that TCAF was rolled out too quickly across Helmand, and especially into districts where the environment was not conducive to regular interaction with non-hostile local populations.[51] 52 Brigade may have pushed TCAF too far and too fast, but it did at least invest in developing this new capability for influence operations.

The contrasting approaches of 52 and previous brigades is also evident in their respective approaches to battle. 12 Mechanised Brigade's final operation, Op. PALIK WAHEL, aimed to clear Taliban from the Green Zone between the towns of Gereshk and Sangin. The operation involved sweeps by large mechanized forces supported by armour and artillery. 52 Brigade arrived in the aftermath of Op. PALIK WAHEL to find that operation had caused the local population to flee into the desert.[52] Similarly, Brigadier Mackay also found that the retaking of Now Zad by 3 Brigade in 2007 had involved such heavy fighting that the population never returned; Now Zad had become a ghost town. Thus, when 52 Brigade was tasked with retaking Musa Qaleh from the Taliban, Brigadier Mackay was determined that this should be done in a way that minimised the displacement of the local population. For Brigadier Mackay, "the people were the prize," not ground or enemy attrition. Thus, he planned a cautious offensive, involving armoured forces slowly approaching the town on both flanks weeks in advance of the main assault. The intention was not to capture and kill Taliban forces, but rather to coerce them into leaving the town and thereby avoiding the necessity for a major battle. This approach also gave the local population plenty of warning so they could seek safety in advance of the final assault. This contrasted with the major clearance operations by 12

[50] Author interview with Brig. Andrew Mackay, Comd 52 Bde, 29 January 2009, DCDC Shrivenham.
[51] Author interview with NKET officer for Operations Company in Laskhar Gar, 2 YORKS BG, 52 Brigade HQ, Redford Cavalry Barracks, Edinburgh, 29 June 2009.
[52] Grey, *Operational Snakebite*, 61.

Brigade most of which proceeded with no prior messaging to warn the population because they did not want to alert the Taliban.[53] In contrast, 52 Brigade were prepared to compromise operational security in order to keep the local population on side.[54] The plan largely worked; the Taliban fled Musa Qaleh after a brief fight.[55] Within hours of recapturing the town, 52 Brigade started pre-planned stabilization activities. As one journalist on the ground noted: "The residents of Musa Qala voted with their feet soon after the arrival of the Afghan army. Tractors, pick-up trucks and carts started bringing people home."[56]

This new population-centric approach continued under 16 Brigade on its second tour in Helmand from April to October 2008. This time under the command of Brigadier Mark Carleton-Smith, the brigade's CONOPS was to "go deep not broad." Hence the British Task Force focused on protecting population centres, and on developing the Afghan government's influence and authority in those areas that realistically could be secured and held. In terms of the enemy, the focus was on undermining Taliban influence rather than fighting their forces. Like 52 Brigade therefore, 16 Brigade strove to achieve an appropriate mix of kinetic and non-kinetic activities. Indeed, Brigadier Carleton-Smith prepared his brigade for a very different campaign than the one conducted by 16 Brigade in 2006: "I wanted to dispel any danger that 16 Brigade might have confused the intensity of the fighting on HERRICK 4 with the nature of the campaign we were seeking to prosecute."[57] Arriving in theatre, 16 Brigade kept almost all of the innovations of their predecessor; e.g., NKETs, inclusion of civilians in the Joint Targeting Board, and partnering of Afghan National Army (ANA)

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[53] Towards the end of their tour, 12 brigade were providing 48 hours notice to locals in affected areas of planned major combat operations. Discussion with staff officer, 52 Brigade, Joint Services Command and Staff College, Shrivenham, 9 March 2010.

[54] Author interview with SO3 J2 Plans, 52 Bde HQ, Redford Cavalry Barracks, Edinburgh, 29 June 2009.

[55] Tom Coghlan, "Taliban Flee as Troops Retake Musa Qala," *The Telegraph*, 10 December 2007, at http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/uknews/1572108/Taliban-flee-as-troops-retake-Musa-Qala.html; Jason Burke and Richard Norton-Taylor, "Allies Move into Town Held by Taliban," *The Guardian*, 10 December 2007, at http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2007/dec/11/afghanistan.military

[56] Grey, *Operation Snakebite*, 280.

[57] Post Operation Interview (POI) with Brig. M. A. P. Carleton-Smith, Comd 16 AA Bde, Op. HERRICK 8 (Apr – Oct 2008), 24 November 2008, Colchester, p. 2.

battalions with task force battlegroups. An exception was TCAF, which 16 Brigade abandoned in August 2008 because they judged it to be unreliable and of limited utility.[58]

Critically, like Mackay, Brig. Carleton-Smith emphasize the centrally of influence operations over combat operations:

> Our plan for the Taliban was to try to undermine their strategy, rather than merely fight their forces. Their strategy seemed to be more one of influence, intimidation, and the provision of parallel shadow government than of tactical engagement. Therefore the aim was to marginalize their influence in the centres of population.[59]

Thus brigade command staff understood that influence is "everything we do."[60] To this end, 16 Brigade developed greater integration with the expanding British-led PRT in the provincial capital, Lashkar Gah. The brigade planning section, J-5, were physically moved to the PRT HQ. Moreover, the deputy brigade commander, Col. Neil Hutton, became one of the three PRT deputies. Under 16 Brigade, the PRT more than doubled in size: the civilian staff grew from 45 to 94, and military personnel from 19 to 48. By the end of their tour, 16 Brigade concluded that the PRT had "a structure and a process" that would enable it to deliver the British inter-agency plan for Helmand.[61]

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[58] David Wilson and Gareth E Conway "The Tactical Conflict Assessment Framework" *RUSI Journal,* 154/1 (2009), 10-15. TCAF has since been readopted by the British and is currently in use by 19 Brigade in Helmand. Telephone interview with Lt. Col. Richard Wardlaw, CO 36 Engr Regt., 9 February 2009.

[59] Carleton-Smith, POI, 6.

[60] Author interview with staff officer, 16 Brigade HQ, Merville Barracks, Colchester, 16 June 2009.

[61] POR, TFH/H8/J7/13/11/03, 6 October 2008, Annex 2: Civil-Military Lessons.

Explaining British Military Adaptation

The British military campaign in Helmand has been a highly adaptive one. Early innovation was not on the cards: defence chiefs and civilian policymakers did not fear outright defeat in Helmand.[62] Nonetheless, we see from post-tour reports that successive commanders perceived the campaign to be failing, and this drove each to take a different approach to his predecessor. Under 3 Commando Brigade and 12 Mechanised Brigade in 2006-07, adaptation involved exploitation of core competencies. 3 Brigade sought to avoid the mistakes of 16 Brigade, by drawing on a very familiar form of warfare involving MOGs. In turn, 12 Brigade tried to avoid the mistakes of 3 Brigade by clearing ground, but the mechanised approach they took was not conducive to holding ground, let alone securing the population. In contrast, with 52 Brigade we see exploration of a new population-centric, less kinetic approach focused on influence operations. Why did the British way of war in Helmand change in late 2007 and not before?

Enabling Exploration

The British military had, and still has, all the characteristics that enable exploration. It has weak organisational memory. It invests relatively little in developing and promulgating lessons learned. The MOD's lessons management system does generate "lessons" and requires a response from the relevant defence "stakeholders". But this is a mechanical process that encourages a tick-box approach and fails to distinguish and prioritise big operational lessons from small technical lessons.[63] Traditionally, the British military has also been largely disinterested in formal doctrine, relying instead

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[62] The British government's view in mid 2007 was that the Taliban did not present a "strategic threat" to security in Afghanistan. House of Commons Defence Committee, *UK Operations in Afghanistan*, Thirteenth Report of Session 2006-07, HC 408 (London: TSO, 18 July 2007), para. 35.

[63] For example, in a survey of the lessons identified on the Land Lessons Database of this system from 2001-2008, I only found one that concerned the effectiveness of civil-military Comprehensive Approach. "Stability operations and principles," 7th Armoured Brigade, TELIC 7, Land Lessons Database, Defence Lessons Identified Management System, accessed 29 April 2008 at UK Land Warfare Centre, Warminster.

on informal officer networks to transfer corporate knowledge.[64] In the 1980s, the British Army came to appreciate the need to get serious about doctrine, and so from the 1990s on, the British became significant producers of military doctrine.[65] However, the view within the British Army going into Helmand was that it lacked an up-to-date COIN doctrine. Thus, 52 Brigade looked for doctrine to inform its training and preparations, it drew on the new U.S. Army/U.S. Marine Corps doctrine on COIN, Field Manual (FM) 3-24, which was issued to all commanders in the brigade. Indeed, 52 Brigade's CONOPS, "Clear, Hold, Build," was taken directly from FM 3-24.[66] Actually, the British Army did have a COIN doctrine, produced in 1995, that was fit for purpose: and indeed, this doctrine informed FM 3-24. However, *Countering Insurgent Operations* (1995) was not mass produced and promulgated, because the British Army's main focus in the mid 1990s was on peace operations, and so was little known about a decade later.[67] In other words, poor organisational memory prevented the British Army from recovering core competencies. At the same time, as the case of 52 Brigade illustrates, it gave impetus to the search for new ideas.

The British military campaign is fairly decentralised, insofar as the task force commander is given considerable leeway to shape his own campaign. Formally, the task force commander works within two chains of command. There is an ISAF command chain that runs from the Commander ISAF (COMISAF) to the Commander of RC(S), down to the British task force commander. There is also a national command chain that runs from the British National Command authorities through PJHQ to the British task force commander. Successive post-tour reports indicate that British task force commanders have never felt compelled to follow directives from COMISAF. Reinforcing this

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[64] Colin McInnes and John Stone, "The British Army and Military Doctrine," in Michael Duffy, Theo Farrell and Geoffrey Sloan (eds.), *Doctrine and Military Effectiveness* (Exeter: SPSG, 1997), 14-25; Brian Holden-Reid, "Warfighting Doctrine and the British Army," in Army Code 71565, *Army Doctrine Publication, Vol. 1 Operations*, HQDT/18/34/46 (London: MOD, June 1994), 1A-1 – 1A-15.
[65] Colin McInnes, *Hot War, Cold War: The British Army's Way of Warfare, 1945-1995* (London: Brassey's, 1996), 70-2.
[66] POI with Brig. A. D. Mackay, Comd 52 Inf Bde, Op HERRICK 7 (Oct 07 – Apr 2008), 3 July 2008, Redford Barracks, Edinburgh, 4.
[67] Colonel Alex Alderson, "The Validity of British Army Counterinsurgency Doctrine after the War in Iraq, 2003-2009," Defence Academy College of Management and Technology, Cranfield University, 2009.

is the British military culture of command (called "mission command") which seeks to preserve the autonomy of the commander. Hence, PJHQ gives an overall guidance but leaves it up to the task force commander to define his own CONOPS and operational design. 52 Brigade was operating to the Joint Plan for Helmand (which was produced in late 2005 and early 2006). But this joint plan was pretty thin on detail, especially in the military line of operations. The plans officer for 52 Brigade noted how the brigade "received very little in the way of higher formation direction in campaign terms" and hence "we were at liberty to identity what effect we wanted to have, where, and (to a greater or lesser degree) when we wanted it to be put into effect."[68] As it transpired, the Joint Plan for Helmand was replaced during 52's tour by a new inter-agency plan, called the Helmand Road Map (HRM). More to the point, the HRM was produced by the PRT and 52 Brigade planners in theatre, and was subsequently adopted by the UK government.[69]

Staffing of campaigns by the British military involves regular personnel turnover. As noted, the British task force rotates every six months, and with it so do the British commander and his staff. This contrasts with longer 9-12 month tours of U.S. brigade combat teams in Iraq and Afghanistan, and even longer tours of U.S. command staffs (which can last two years). The lack of continuity of command can obviously cause problems, in terms of taking the longer perspective. But it has provided regular opportunities for the British task force to adopt a different approach, as attempted by three brigades (3, 12, 52) between 2006-2008 in response to a failing campaign.

The puzzle remains, however. Since poor organisational memory, decentralisation, and personnel change were present from the beginning of the campaign, why did it take 18 months for the British military to shift from exploiting core competencies to exploring a new approach? Here the context of the campaign mattered.

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[68] Major G. E. Minton, PWRR, SO2 G5 Plans, HQ 52 Inf Bde, "Operational Planning: A Reality", powerpoint presentation notes, 2.
[69] Farrell and Gordon, "COIN Machine", 672.

A More Favourable Context

52 Brigade did benefit from certain contextual factors that facilitated the shift to a "softer" way of war, namely, new Taliban tactics, increased ANA capabilities, and increased resources. In 2006-2007, Taliban forces suffered considerable attrition in heavy fighting with ISAF in Helmand. British Defence Intelligence puts the number of Taliban dead in the thousands (though some British commanders have expressed doubts at such high figures).[70] Accordingly, since early 2008, the Taliban have been less inclined to launch major assaults on district centres and ISAF bases. Thus, when U.S. Marines launched an offensive against the Taliban strongholds in Garmsir district in 2008, the Taliban main force retreated rather than put up a fight. Equally, when 16 Brigade launched an air assault on Taliban villages south of Musa Qaleh, they found that the Taliban had fled.[71] In Kajaki, an Afghan interpreter hired by the British to listen to Taliban communications in 2008 "described almost comical attempts by different commanders to shirk combat and foist the responsibility on other commanders."[72] Essentially the Taliban learned the cost of engaging in direct attacks on ISAF forces. Instead, they have made increasing use of IEDs to fix British forces and to defend their own positions. Most ISAF casualties are now caused by Improvised Explosive Devices (IEDs).[73] The Taliban did continue to engage in fight-fires with British forces. Hence, at other times, 16 Brigade had some fierce firefights with Taliban around Musa Qaleh.[74] And when 3 Commando Brigade rotated into Lashkar Gah, on their second tour in October 2008 to replace 16 Brigade, they discovered a large Taliban force (some 300 strong) moving into position to attack the provincial

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[70] Author interview with staff officer, Defence Intelligence, Ministry of Defence, London, November 2008.
[71] Sam Kiley, *Desperate Glory: At War in Helmand with Britain's 16 Air Assault Brigade* (London: Bloomsbury, 2009), 33-34, 137.
[72] Tom Coghlan, "The Taliban in Helmand: An Oral History," in Antonio Giustozzi (ed.), *Decoding the New Taliban* (London: Hurst, 2009), 145.
[73] 16 Brigade reported the number of IEDs as "doubling" each month of their tour (April-October 2008). Notes from Collective Debrief of 16 Air Assault Brigade, 3 December 2008, Merville Barracks, Essex. US fatalities in ISAF caused by IEDs increased from 27% in 2006 to 54% in 2008, and 47% up to May 2009. Jason H. Campbell and Jeremy Shapiro, *Afghanistan Index: Tracking Variable of Reconstruction and Security in Post 9/11 Afghanistan*, Brookings Institution, 19 May 2009, figure 1.3, 6, http://www.brookings.edu/foreign-policy/~/media/Files/Programs/FP/afghanistan%20index/index.pdf
[74] Kiley, *Desperate Glory*, pp. 108-114.

capital: this force was destroyed by ISAF air power.[75] Overall, however, we see more cautious

approach from 2008 by a battered Taliban which, whilst no less deadly to ISAF forces, has been

more conductive to stabilisation operations because it has resulted in fewer battles in and around

district centres.

Just as Taliban were becoming more cautious in 2008, so Afghan National Army (ANA)

capabilities were improving. The ANA grew from around 50,000 in 2007 to almost 80,000 in 2008.[76]

Moreover, the ANA increased its ability to conduct battalion-level operations; 30% of ANA

battalions could do so with the support of international forces by December 2006, rising to 44% by

December 2007 and 62% by December 2008.[77] The situation in Helmand reflected this national

trend. Accordingly, the British task forces have been increasingly able to integrate ANA into their

campaign. Indeed, the mentoring of ANA and ANP was another central element of 52 Brigade's

CONOPS which gave prominence to "a determination to facilitate, coordinate and encourage greater

Afghan ownership of the security architecture within HMD", and recognised that that this would

"involve risk and will require patience and steady nerves but we must be prepared to follow Afghan

advice to Afghan problems and be part of an Afghan-led solution."[78] By mid 2007, there were five

ANA battalions deployed in Helmand, with a sixth battalion added in late 2008. Over this period we

see a progression from using ANA to backfill areas secured by the British to, from late 2007 on, the

partnering of ANA battalions with British battle groups and the ANA being given their own

independent area of operations within Helmand.[79]

INSERT Table 1 HERE

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[75] Notes from Collective Debrief of 3 Commando Brigade, at RM Barracks, Stonehouse, Plymouth, 7 July 2009.
[76] *Afghanistan Index*, Figure 1.15, p. 12.
[77] ISAF Metrics Brief, 2007-2008, UNCLASS // REL USA ISAF NATO, slide 8.
[78] Op. HERRICK 7, Op Order, 27 OCT 2007, p. 1.
[79] Author interview with Brig. Andrew Mackay, Development, Concepts, and Doctrine Centre, Shrivenham, 29 January 2009.

Finally, the campaign has received ever more support and resources, especially as the British government shifted its strategic focus from Iraq to Afghanistan. Hence, British troops numbers more than doubled between late 2006 and late 2007, peaking in 2008 at just over 8,500 (see table 1). It should be noted that not all these troops were assigned to the task force in Helmand: a couple of thousand (including one battlegroup) were assigned to supporting RC(S) in Kandahar. At the same time, the British task force was bolstered by an Estonian company and a Danish battlegroup (deployed in the Centre of Helmand); the UK Task Force was renamed Task Force Helmand (TFH) in 2008 to reflect the inclusion of international partners. In addition, TFH received support from various U.S. units operating in Helmand over 2007-2008. Equally significant has been the improved equipment for British forces. However, this lift in troop numbers and equipment already had started with 12 Brigade. Moreover, additional armored vehicles and artillery systems are not necessarily conducive to a more influence-orientated approach; arguably, it can have the opposite effect by encouraging commanders to go "heavy and kinetic." The key equipment shortfall, noted by all commanders in their post-tour reports, is the shortage of helicopters. This problem plagued 52 Brigade as much as previous brigades.[80]

In sum, the operational landscape changed in Helmand between 2006 and 2007, with a shift in Taliban tactics, rising ANA numbers and capability, and increased resources available to the British-led task force. This resulted in a far more permissive context for the British to develop a more influence-orientated and population-centric approach. Arguably these favourable factors were already present under 12 Mechanised Brigade. The final missing piece of the jigsaw is the character of 52 brigade and its commander. As a long-standing regular brigade (formed in 1899), 12 Mechanised Brigade had an extensive and well developed and exercised repertoire of conventional combat competencies, where were employed in the 1991 Gulf War and in Iraq in 2004. In contrast, 52 Infantry Brigade was formed for WWI and disband afterwards, then reformed for WWII and

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[80] Mackay, POI, 14. 16 Brigade following 52, also complained about the lack of helicopters. Carleton-Smith, POI, 11.

again disbanded afterwards. In the 1960s, it reformed but only as a reserve brigade. In 2002 it took command of regular army units but as a Type B brigade, i.e., a non-deployable regional brigade. In February 2006, it was turned into a Type A deployable brigade. In late 2006, Brigadier Mackay was notified that his brigade was to be deployed to Helmand within a year. 52 Brigade staff then underwent a massive expansion; the brigade HQ increased from 15 to eventually 175 staff.[81] Incoming staff officers brought a wealth of experience with them. But the key point is that this was a newly formed Type A brigade, and hence one that was less committed to an established repertoire of core competences and one more open to new alternatives introduced by Brigadier Mackay. Moreover, Brigadier Mackay was less conventionally-minded that his predecessors in Helmand. Prior to taking over in Afghanistan, he had led missions to reform the Iraqi police force (2004) and the Lebanese Army (2006).[82] On his return from Helmand, Brigadier Mackay was to work in the Development, Concepts and Doctrine Centre promoting the influence-orientated approach to operations.[83]

Conclusion

The British military has developed new tactics and capabilities for a more population-centric approach to its campaign in Helmand. To be sure, the British task force still relies on hard combat power to defeat Taliban field forces. It still conducts major sweeps to clear Taliban out of key areas. Hence, over June and July 2009, the TFH under 19 Light Brigade conducted a major offensive against Taliban strongholds in Babaji (which lies in the Green Zone between Lashkar Gah and

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[81] POI with Mackay, p. 2.
[82] Mackay biography (September 2009), on file with author.
[83] Andrew Mackay and Steve Tatham, *Behavioural Conflict: From General to Strategic Corporal: Complexity, Adaptation and Influence*, Shrivenham Paper No. 9 (December 2009).

Gereshk). Operation PANCHAI PALANG involved 3,000 British troops, as well as Danish and ANA forces: ten British troops were killed in the operation along with many hundreds of Taliban.[84]

Still, there is change in the British approach in the emphasis on influence operations and non-kinetic effects, on establishing an enduring presence, and on developing the civil-military partnership. This change started with 52 Brigade, which developed new capabilities for influence operations. It was consolidated by 16 Brigade (on its second tour), which embedded its military planners in the civilian-led PRT. The new approach was continued under 3 Brigade (also on its second tour) and under 19 Brigade. 3 Commando Brigade built on civil-military integration by developing a Joint Command Board for the PRT and TFH, which was chaired by the PRT civilian head.[85] 19 Brigade also placed an emphasis on district stabilisation teams (comprising civilian and advisors and military support officers), which it saw as "pivotal" to the British civil-military campaign, especially in stabilising areas "on the heels of clearance operations."[86]

This article has shown that successive British brigades have responded to the operational challenges in Helmand by adapting. The first brigade to deploy into Helmand had an appalling time of it. Woefully under-resourced and under immense pressure from different quarters to overextend, 16 Air Assault Brigade, found itself fixed in several garrisons spread out across Helmand. The two brigades that followed each adapted to the mistakes of the last by exploiting their own core competencies. 3 Commando Brigade adopted a highly mobile approach to unfix the British task force. This failed to provide enduring presence, especially in the ADZ. 12 Mechanised Brigade conducted a number of large clearance operations to clear the Taliban out of the ADZ but these proved ineffective when it came to holding ground afterwards. The fourth brigade to deploy adapted by exploring new ways of operating. 52 Infantry Brigade put influence operations at the centre of its CONOPS and developed new capabilities for non-kinetic activities. As noted above, this

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84 Richard Norton-Taylor "Deadly and Maybe Decisive: Officers Hail Panther's Claw," *The Guardian*, 27 July 2009, at http://www.guardian.co.uk/uk/2009/jul/27/panthers-claw-operation-afghanistan-taliban
85 Notes from collective debrief, 3 Commando Brigade.
86 POR, TFH/H10, 6 Oct 2009, 5.

new population-centric approach was consolidated by the brigades that followed: 16 and 3 (both on their second tour), and 19 Brigade.[87]

Whilst the academic literature is dominated by top-down accounts of military innovation (involving a mix of technological, structural and doctrinal change), the British campaign in Helmand confirms the importance of studying bottom-up military adaptation.[88] Most of the time, when encountering problems in the field, militaries will adapt. And oft-times, such adaptations are enough to turn a campaign around. Adaptation may involve better exploitation of existing tactics, techniques and technologies, or it may involve exploring new ways and means of operating. This was the case with the British in Helmand, with the development of a population-centric approach and new capabilities for influence operations and for generating soft effects.

Overtime exploration may accumulate into what might be properly called military innovation. Arguably, this is occurring with the British military in Helmand. The population-centric approach focused on influence operations is being institutionalised in structural and doctrinal changes. On the recommendation of 3 Brigade in 2008, 19 Brigade created, and 11 Brigade (who followed on) have retained, an Influence Cell in the task force HQ led by an SO1 (Colonel) Influence; under previous brigades, "influence" was seen as the responsibility of psychological operations or media operations staff.[89] Furthermore, the British Army has produced a new field manual on COIN which recognises that influence "underpins everything which British forces undertake because counterinsurgency is as much about the battle of perceptions as it is about military operations targeted against insurgents."[90] The MOD is also producing cultural advisors to be deployed in Helmand. Cultural understanding is

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[87] Of course, successful adaptation by British forces in the field will not guarantee campaign success. Many other factors will shape the outcome of the campaign, including the effectiveness of ISAF in other provinces, and even more importantly, the growing capacities and effectiveness of Afghan public institutions and security forces.

[88] The case of the U.S. military in Iraq from 2005-2007 also suggests the importance of studying bottom-up change by militaries at war. See James A. Russell Innovation, "Transformation and War: Counterinsurgency Operations in Anbar and Ninewa, Iraq, 2005-2007," *Journal of Strategic Studies* (forthcoming 2010); Philipp Rotmann, David Tohn, and Jaron Wharton, "Learning Under Fire: Progress and Dissent in the US Military," *Survival* 51/4 (2009), 31-48.

[89] Author interview with SO1 Influence, Col. Ed Flute, TFH HQ, Lashkar Gah, 3 October 2009.

[90] Army Code 71876, British Army Field Manual, Vol. 1, Part 10, *Countering Insurgency* (London: MOD, October 2009), para. 1-3. This AFM also includes a whole chapter (Section 6) on Influence.

essential for an influence-orientated, population-centric approach.[91] The push for this capability came from the British Army's Land Headquarters and from the Directorate of Joint Capability in the MOD in 2008, both of which identified the need for cultural specialists to support the Afghanistan campaign. In February 2009, an Afghan Specialists Joint Implementation Team was established in the MOD to develop this capability. By October 2009, a Cultural Advisor and a Cultural Coordinator were deployed to the Influence Cell in TFH. Cultural Advisors will be deployed in each of the British battlegroups by February 2010. In addition, basic training and pre-deployment training is being adapted to develop cultural awareness in military personnel.[92] The development of these new cultural capabilities has also been supported by new doctrine promulgated in January 2009.[93]

It remains to be seen how long lasting this innovation in influence operations will be. History suggests that, time and again, the British Army has forgotten innovations from COIN campaigns (innovations often institutionalised in campaign specific doctrine) and has had to relearn them. Indeed, contrary to the picture offered by John Nagl of the British Army as a "learning organisation"[94], it would appear that the British Army went through a series of campaign specific learning-cycles in the 20th century, in each case to correct an approach that was overly military and kinetic approach, and develop a more comprehensive and (what would today be called) population-centric approach. [95] In this respect, the three organisational attributes that assist exploration – poor memory, decentralisation, and personnel change – may well hinder the process of innovation, specifically the institutionalisation and recovery of innovations.[96]

This article has not explicitly discussed the question of military learning. Obviously organisational adaptation involves learning, both from contemporary experience and from the

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[91] Lt. Mike Martin, "The Importance of Cultural Understanding to the Military," *British Army Review* 147 (2009), 44-49.
[92] Author interview with official, Ministry of Defence, London 29 January 2010.
[93] *The Significance of Culture to the Military*, Joint Doctrine Note 1/09, DCDC, January 2009.
[94] John A. Nagl, *Learning to Eat Soup with a Knife: Counterinsurgency Lessons from Malaya and Vietnam* (Chicago, IL: Chicago University Press, 2002).
[95] Victoria L. Nolan, "Command and Culture: Military leadership and the Evolution of the British Army's Approach to Small Wars," PhD thesis, King''s College London, 2009.
[96] My thanks to Gautam Mukunda at MIT for suggesting this point.

organisation's past. This, in turn, raises important questions about the specific modalities of British military learning. How did field brigades learn, both in preparing for and during operational deployment? What learning occurred at the institutional level, i.e., the British Army, Royal Marines, and joint institutions (especially PJHQ)? What learning occurred across theatres; in other words, what lessons did the British take from Iraq in Afghanistan? Finally, to what extent did the British learn from other militaries, especially from the US military? The example of 52 Brigade drawing on the new U.S. COIN field manual (FM 3-24) in developing its CONOPS suggests that the British were learning from the Americans. However, the picture in complicated because, as noted earlier, FM 3-24 itself drew on British COIN doctrine. True learning, much like explorative adaptation, is not something that comes easily to the military.[97] But Afghanistan suggests that it field formations do learn, and that learning is integral to military adaptation. More research needs to be done to understand precisely how learning occurs. This article has sought to illuminate the end point of learning, namely how militaries adapt. It has also shown just how much the British have adapted in Helmand.

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[97] John Kiszely, "Learning About Counterinsurgency," *RUSI Journal* 151/6 (2006).

Acknowledgements

Table 1: British troop numbers in Afghanistan[98]

Task force Brigade	Date	Size
16 Air Assault Bde	April – Oct 2006	3,150 (4,500)
3 Commando Bde	Oct 2006 – April 2007	5,200
12 Mechanised Bde	April – Oct 2007	6,500
52 Bde	Oct 2007 – April 2008	7,750
16 Air Assault Bde	April – Oct 2008	8,530
3 Commando Bde	Oct 2008 – April 2009	8,300

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[98] Data from ISAF Troops Placemat archive at http://www.nato.int/isaf/docu/epub/pdf/placemat.html

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