

# The 12 February 2011 Battle for the Afghan National Police Provincial Headquarters in Kandahar

By Captain Neal C. Dyson

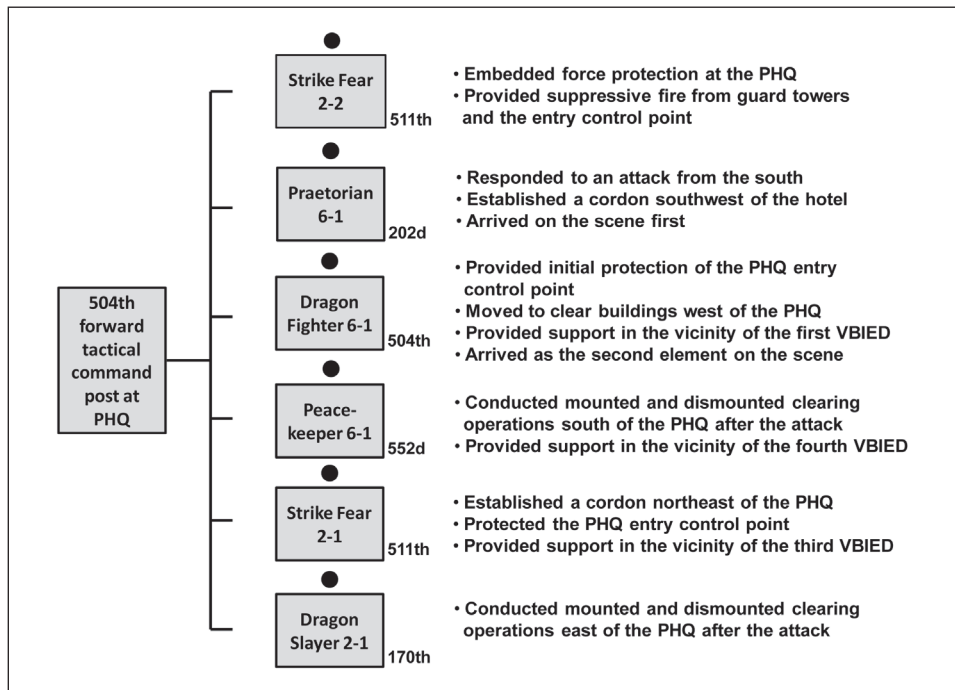
*The embedded headquarters element of the 504th Military Police Battalion awoke to a cold, rainy day in Kandahar City, Afghanistan. Little did the Dragon Fighters know that, only hours later, they would take part in a 4-hour battle to defend each other and the Afghan National Police (ANP) provincial headquarters (PHQ) in the center of Kandahar City.*

## Shots Ring Out From a Nearby Hotel

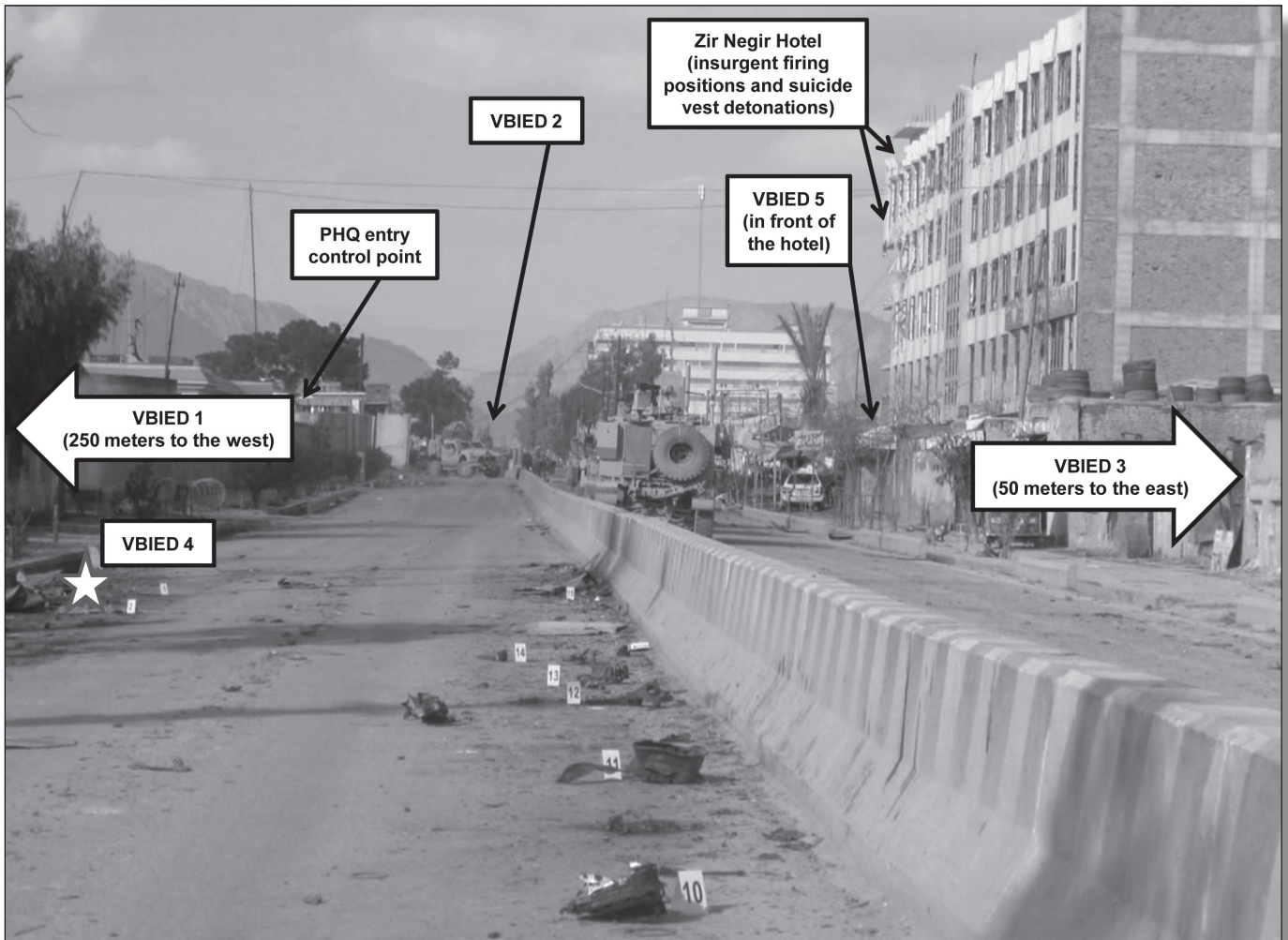
It was just before noon on 12 February 2011, and the ANP PHQ in Kandahar City was a flurry of activity as policemen and local Afghan citizens conducted their daily business among the many offices that make up the PHQ facility. A weekly meeting for Afghan and coalition force commanders had just ended an hour earlier, when a burst of small arms fire began to rain down on the PHQ. The source of the fire was quickly determined to be from the direction of the nearby Zir Negir Hotel. However, before the exact location of the incoming fire could be pinpointed, multiple rocket-propelled grenade rounds were also fired at the police compound, impacting near the entry control point. Two nearby military police squads—the 504th Military Police Battalion Headquarters and Headquarters Detachment and the 202d Military Police Company—had heard the initial small arms fire; and within minutes, both squads and eight vehicles had positioned themselves along Route Elizabeth, to the east of the PHQ, to provide suppressive fire against the attack.

After reporting the presence of insurgents engaging from the rooftop and the top two floors of the hotel complex, fire was returned from the PHQ guard towers (which were jointly manned

by the 511th Military Police Company and the ANP) and the entry control point on the east side of the PHQ. There were two military police squads positioned between the PHQ and the hotel. The squad leaders instructed the gunners to obtain positive identification of the insurgent gunmen before firing. Only seconds later, one of the insurgents fired an AK47 assault rifle at the military police squads located in the street below. Gunners immediately responded with a barrage of M2 and M240B machine gun fire toward the insurgent, chewing up the insurgent's position. A second insurgent gunman



Hastily developed U.S. task organization for the PHQ defense



View looking north along Route Elizabeth following the battle

appeared in a fourth-floor hotel window, and a third showed up on the rooftop. All three insurgents were disguised in ANP uniforms. The overwhelming suppressive fire from the military police squads and the PHQ guard force pinned down the enemy, eliminated their initiative, fixed them in the hotel, and limited them to a defensive position.

### The Attack Takes a Complex Turn

As military police continued to respond to the ongoing threat from the hotel, guard force reports began to come in from the other side of the PHQ compound. Soldiers manning a guard tower on the northwest side of the PHQ had been on the receiving end of a grenade attack. As many as four grenades had been thrown over the exterior wall in the vicinity of the tower, with two detonating at the base of the tower and two more detonating on the outside of the perimeter wall. At the same time, a rocket-propelled grenade that had been fired from the hotel sailed over the guard tower, impacting a nearby residence. All guard towers also reported sporadic, small arms fire from the adjacent Zahir Shahi School to the north.

As military police squads and the PHQ guard force reacted to contact from three sides of the PHQ, the battalion tactical command post at the PHQ began repositioning mounted elements to the west side of the PHQ in response to the new threats. Additional military police squads continued to arrive in support. About 30 minutes after initial contact, an air weapons team (consisting of an OH-58 Kiowa reconnaissance helicopter and an AH-64 Apache attack helicopter) arrived on station. The operations and training officer (S-3) of the 504th Military Police Battalion immediately began to employ the team, which proved to be a valuable asset in identifying targets on the hotel rooftop and in providing military police on the ground with visibility of other maneuvering elements and all incidents that were occurring around the PHQ.

The battalion tactical command post authorized the Apache pilot to fire the M230 chain gun into an empty lot adjacent to the hotel. The noise of the 30-millimeter machine gun prompted the insurgents to take cover, allowing a 30-man, dismounted ANP quick-reaction force (QRF) to safely maneuver its way through one of the first-floor entrances of the building. The QRF element, led by Colonel Fazal Ahmad Shirzad

(the chief of security for Kandahar Province), immediately sealed the four hotel exits and began searching the building for insurgents.

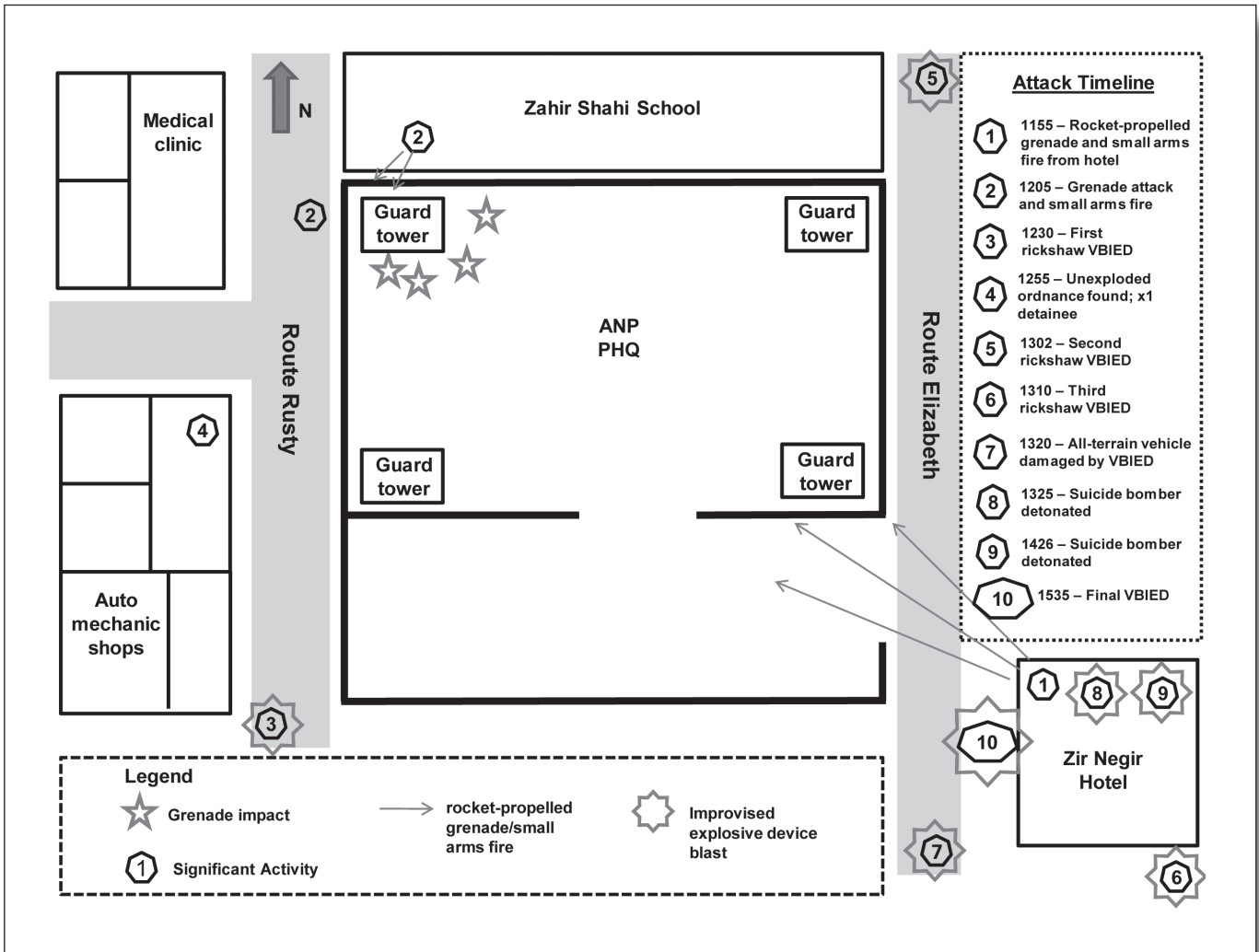
While the ANP cleared the lower floors of the hotel, Soldiers inside the PHQ and responding squads from the 202d, 511th, and 552d Military Police Companies maintained suppressive fire against insurgents near the roof. The battalion commander's protective service detail (PSD) repositioned to Route Rusty, west of the PHQ, and countered ongoing attacks centered on the northwest guard tower. The PSD immediately began searching nearby compounds for the origin of the earlier grenade attack, eventually locating rocket-propelled grenade rounds and detaining two suspects. At that time, the battalion tactical command post and the ANP tactical command post jointly began maneuvering military police squads and Afghan security forces into a tight cordon around the hotel complex and the PHQ—a pivotal move in limiting the effectiveness of vehicle-borne, improvised explosive devices (VBIEDs), which could have allowed insurgents to breach the PHQ inner defensive perimeter.

### The First VBIED Detonates

At 1230, small arms were continuing to be fired from the hotel and harassing fire and grenades were still being reported from the opposite side of the PHQ. At this point, insurgents added another dynamic by detonating the first VBIED on Route Rusty, southwest of the PHQ. A three-wheeled, rickshaw style vehicle exploded just south of the battalion commander's PSD, which had just moved to respond to the grenade attacks near the northwest guard tower. Smoke and debris from the blast covered the sky along the western side of the compound, obscuring the view for tower guards who were still trying to locate the insurgents who were throwing grenades.

### The Second VBIED Detonates

At 1302, a second VBIED detonated along Route Elizabeth, to the northeast of the PHQ. Another rickshaw style vehicle exploded in the vicinity of several shops and many local citizens just east of the Zahir Shahi School. One Afghan National Army soldier and two local national



Graphic depiction of the attack location

*“Just minutes later, at 1310, another rickshaw style vehicle detonated on the southeast side of the hotel complex. This was the third VBIED explosion in a span of 25 minutes, all three involving rickshaw style vehicles packed with explosives.”*

civilians were killed in this blast. Several civilians, including children, and a Soldier from the 511th Military Police Company were also injured. The Soldiers of the 511th assisted the ANP in evacuating the casualties.

### **The Third VBIED Detonates**

**J**ust minutes later, at 1310, another rickshaw style vehicle detonated on the southeast side of the hotel complex. This was the third VBIED explosion in a span of 25 minutes, all three involving rickshaw style vehicles packed with explosives. It was the quick response of coalition forces in setting up a security cordon around the hotel complex and the PHQ that resulted in the failure of the rickshaw VBIEDs to get as close to the fight as the insurgents had desired. Thus, the effectiveness of the VBIEDs on security forces was limited. The three VBIED explosions resulted mainly in injuries to local citizens. No coalition force soldiers were seriously wounded, and only a small number of Afghan policemen were injured.

### **The Fourth VBIED Detonates**

**T**en minutes later, at 1320 (about 1 hour 30 minutes after the first shots were fired from the hotel), the fourth VBIED exploded from a four-door sedan that was parked alongside the road outside the PHQ. The detonation occurred just to the south of the hotel and only a few feet from a mine-resistant, ambush-protected, all-terrain vehicle that belonged to a squad from the 552d Military Police Company. The vehicle gunner lost consciousness, but sustained only minor injuries. The vehicle itself was disabled, forcing the squad to use chains to quickly tow the vehicle back into the protection of the PHQ.

### **Suicide Bombers Detonate**

**W**hile the 504th Military Police Battalion and the ANP worked on the outside to suppress the insurgents, Colonel Shirzad and the ANP QRF continued to search the inside of the hotel. The air weapons team assisted the ANP by providing suppressive fire to help disguise their movement. However, the ANP soon realized that they were facing an even more dangerous threat than AK47 assault rifles or rocket-propelled grenades.

At about 1325, one of the insurgents detonated the explosive vest that he was wearing after hearing the QRF inside the hotel. The blast ripped through the fourth floor of the hotel, destroying a concrete stairwell and most of the northwest corner of the building. Debris rained down on the street below, some striking a 552d Military Police Company Soldier who had been working to move the mine-resistant, ambush-protected, all-terrain vehicle that had been damaged in an earlier VBIED attack. Fortunately, the Soldier suffered only minor injuries to his hands and back.

Although some QRF members suffered minor lacerations from the suicide vest, the QRF continued clearing the hotel room by room, looking for any remaining insurgents. More than an hour after entering the building, the QRF located two insurgents in a wedding hall ballroom on the fifth floor. At the sight of the ANP, one of the insurgents managed to detonate the explosive vest he was wearing; fortunately, no ANP members were killed in this blast. The second suicide bomber was unable to detonate his vest and was killed when the QRF opened fire. All three of the insurgents who were wearing explosive vests were also wearing ANP uniforms; however, it was later confirmed that none of them actually were ANP. Unsure whether there were additional insurgents in the hotel, the QRF continued to clear the rest of the building.

After the hotel had been cleared, Colonel Shirzad directed some QRF members to remain inside while he and his PSD exited the building. The sight of Colonel Shirzad caused the ANP who were serving as part of the cordon to collapse their positions and gather at the front of the hotel. Coalition forces implored their counterparts to maintain an elevated security posture and to avoid the suspicious vehicles in the hotel parking lot. But because more than 2 hours had passed since the last VBIED had detonated, the ANP assumed that the threat had ended.

### **The Final VBIED Detonates**

**T**he last VBIED detonated from a tan Toyota Corolla in a crowded parking lot on the west side of the hotel at 1535. The insurgents had staged the vehicle, which was packed with explosives, in front of the hotel earlier that day. The blast was set off as a large group of ANP members, Afghan National Army soldiers, and National Directorate of Security agents stood nearby.



Only minutes before, Colonel Shirzad and some members of the QRF had emerged from the Zir Negir Hotel unscathed, having defeated small arms fire, grenades, and three suicide vests. The area had been reinforced with additional higher-headquarters support from the 1st Infantry Brigade Combat Team, 4th Infantry Division. Explosive ordnance disposal assets had arrived to assist in dealing with improvised explosive devices and suicide vests. Coalition forces had urged the crowd of Afghan National Security Force onlookers to reestablish the perimeter around the hotel; however, the ANP believed that the fight was over.

The final, devastating VBIED detonation resulted in the deaths of 15 ANP members, three Afghan National Army soldiers, and three National Directorate of Security agents. More than 25 Afghan National Security Force personnel were wounded. Military police from the 504th Military Police Battalion and Soldiers from supporting units scrambled to obtain medical aid for the casualties. Many of the wounded were transported to nearby Camp Nathan Smith, where U.S. medical teams provided lifesaving treatment. Others were taken to local medical centers a short distance away. Three battalion Soldiers received minor injuries in the blast, but were able to quickly return to duty.

### The ANP Learns Critical Lessons

Showing discipline and determination throughout the entire attack, the ANP successfully neutralized three suicide bombers and cleared a five-story hotel. It was only during that fifth and final VBIED that Afghan operational discipline broke down. U.S. forces and the Afghans studied this attack and were able to incorporate lessons learned into future training and operations. In addition, significant changes were made to further improve the overall force protection of the PHQ since it remained a high-value target for insurgents.

### The School Poses a Threat

The details of the insurgents' use of the Zahir Shahi School during the attack are not completely clear. According to multiple guard force reports, the school—which is located immediately to the north of the PHQ—was the source of some small arms and grenade contact. A joint ANP element/202d Military Police Company squad entered the school at 1418 to locate possible insurgents and to defend the compound from further attacks. The team found that glass in some school windows had been broken, and they discovered shell casings in some of the classrooms.

### The Defense Takes the Offensive

Even while the rounds were still flying, the battalion commander and S-3 were busy planning to proactively attack the insurgents with an offensive operation. Not long after the final VBIED had exploded—and while casualties were still being evaluated—the battalion commander called in key leaders and began outlining sectors:

- The 504th Security Force Assistance Team and two additional military police squads were tasked with the area to the west.
- The 202d Military Police Company was instructed to hold its ground at the Zahir Shahi School and the area to the north.
- The 552d Military Police Company commander was assigned the area to the south.
- The 1st Battalion, 22d Infantry Regiment (adjacent battlespace owner) assisted the battalion by cordoning the area east of the Zir Negir Hotel.
- The 511th Military Police Company increased the guard force manning at the PHQ.

The battalion commander then outlined the next step, which involved the clearing of the buildings located to the south and west. Soldiers worked throughout the night to successfully search about 200 compounds in the vicinity of the PHQ.

The 504th extended the defensive perimeter around the PHQ an additional 300 meters to the south and west. The elevated security posture continued for another 24 hours as battalion elements gradually returned to their regular battle rhythm and the focus transitioned to fortifying the PHQ for the next attack.

Fortunately, no U.S. Soldiers were killed in the 12 February 2011 attack. The Afghans who were lost that day will forever be remembered by the battalion Soldiers who, side by side, fought so hard with them on a cold, rainy Saturday in Kandahar City.



*Captain Dyson served as the officer in charge of the 504th Military Police Battalion staff element and was stationed at the PHQ in Kandahar City from June 2010 to June 2011.*

