

**Combat Recovery:** Major Douglas Thorlakson, Deployment dates: 25 Jan 06 – 26 Aug 06, Mission: Op APOLLO / ATHENA Roto 1 (TF 1-06) | August 3rd, 2006

The day began like so many before during the 1st Rotation into southern Afghanistan in 2006. The call from the Battle Group Tactical Operations Centre (TOC) in Kandahar Airfield set off the pagers for the duty recovery low-bed to report to the TOC. Six months of supporting what had turned into a shooting war, led the troops from the Transport Platoon to become combat veterans, accustomed to being shot at and responding to the aftermath of Improvised Explosive Devices.



*An Afghan National Police Officer passes by the remnants of the destroyed vehicle of a suicide car bomber. The engine block had travelled more than 200m before coming to rest. Panjiway District Centre, Afghanistan. 3 Aug 2006. Photo by Doug Thorlakson*

The duty low-bed tractor-trailer deployed in less than ten minutes, fully kitted out for the dangerous roads of Kandahar Province. We received word to prepare a second low-bed truck and a Bison armoured vehicle to transport the troops from those vehicles. Private Mark Pinsent from 1 Service Battalion volunteered to drive the Bison and Corporal Jordan McAuley from the Defence & Security Platoon volunteered as our air-sentry.

We rolled from KAF and were soon in front of the local district police centre in Panjiway. On the other side of the hill about a kilometre away, smoke from mortars and artillery rose into the clear blue sky. Machine gun and rifle fire was punctuated by the continuous hammering of the 25mm chain guns of the LAVs and AH-64 Apache helicopter cannons. This battle was definitely a major engagement.

Casualties mounted and our escort vehicle and armoured ambulance left to assist with the wounded. We re-oriented our convoy to provide all-around security on the roadway. For the next couple of hours, we maintained our security cordon while the fighting around the now-famous White School continued into the afternoon.

Standing watch in the hatch of the Bison, I saw a car turn the corner at high speed, unusual in a built-up area. I raised my arm to signal the driver to stop and pointed my C-6 machine gun at his vehicle. The

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driver pulled over on the roadway and stopped about 50 metres away. He sat there for twenty to thirty seconds. Suddenly, he stepped on the gas and accelerated straight towards our convoy.

Time slows down – in real time I have less than two seconds to decide what to do, but in that instant it seems I had an eternity. I see the vehicle moving forwards, I watch the bullets from my C6 tear into the pavement and into the front of his car as I work the rounds up, then nothing – The driver detonates his vehicle as his final act; a bright flash punctuated with smoke grey clouds disintegrating the explosive-packed vehicle less than 25 metres away.

Slammed back in the hatch, I briefly lose consciousness from the blast. As I regain my senses, I look through the smoke at utter devastation – the driver detonated his vehicle in front of a packed tea-house. The entire façade has been ripped away and the screams and cries from the wounded patrons are heartbreaking. Canadian troops who were on foot have been scattered about the ground like fallen dominoes and my heart sinks. Unbelievably, Pinsent jumps up from the ground. Even with shrapnel in his ankle, he runs over and literally yanks one of the drivers from the ground and stands him up. One by one, the Canadians stand back and dust themselves off as McAuley helps pull me out of the hatch of the Bison. He pulls out a combat field dressing and wraps up my arm which has a chunk of the car stuck in it. There's more shrapnel stuck in my neck between my carotid artery and jugular vein. Even though I would later have surgery to remove the metal, I walked out from the centre of hell with relatively minor wounds.

As the Afghan Police arrive to secure the scene and attend to the wounded, we re-establish our defensive position. The fight on the other side of the hill is carrying on in earnest and casualties mount. The sound of jet engines fills the sky as a massive B-1 bomber flies over at a ridiculously low altitude. The unexpected appearance of such a huge aircraft on the battlefield takes the fight out of the enemy and the noise of the battle dies down. The Battle Group is finally able to extract from the fight. With the help of the Maintenance Recovery Wrecker, and with some ingenuity, they manage to pull the two damaged LAVs into town. In relatively short order the LAVs are put up onto the trailer decks for movement back to base.

As I look at my arm, I know I'm not going to be able to command the vehicle on the way back as I can't operate the machine gun with only one arm. I asked McAuley, a Reserve Infantryman from The Loyal Edmonton Regiment, to command the vehicle on the way back. Pinsent limps towards the drivers hatch and gives me a thumbs up. His ankle still smashed up from the explosion, the tough Newfoundlander didn't even ask for as much as a Tylenol to make the two-hour drive back to base.

We receive orders to walk our vehicles out of town due to the threat. As I pass the explosion site and see what's left of the vehicle and tea-house, I can't believe I'm able to walk away. The vehicle had been stacked with five or six 155mm artillery shells, each with a lethal killing radius of up to 300 metres; I somehow survived. Tragically, more than twenty patrons of the tea-house were not as lucky and were killed. We mount up and as the town rolls away in the distance, I look around the back of the empty Bison. Even with two LAVs out of action, there were so many casualties; it left lots of seats in the convoy. Tragically, for those four brave Canadians who paid the ultimate sacrifice, those seats will be empty forever more.

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