



Select Committee on International Relations and Defence

Corrected oral evidence: The UK and Afghanistan

Wednesday 4 November 2020

10 am

Watch the meeting

Members present: Baroness Anelay of St Johns (The Chair); Lord Alton of Liverpool; Baroness Blackstone; Baroness Fall; Lord Grocott; Lord Hannay of Chiswick; Baroness Helic; Lord Purvis of Tweed; Baroness Rawlings; Lord Reid of Cardowan; Baroness Smith of Newnham.

Evidence Session No. 13

Virtual Proceeding

Questions 108 - 114

Witnesses

I: Brigadier (Retired) Ian Thomas OBE, former Commander of Operation Toral, Dean of Academic Studies, Royal Military Academy Sandhurst; Dr Edward R Flint, Head of Department, Defence & International Affairs Department, Royal Military Academy Sandhurst.

USE OF THE TRANSCRIPT

1. This is a corrected transcript of evidence taken in public and webcast on www.parliamentlive.tv.

Examination of witnesses

Brigadier (Retired) Ian Thomas and Dr Edward R Flint.

Q108 **The Chair:** Good morning. I welcome to this meeting of the International Relations and Defence Select Committee Brigadier Ian Thomas, former commander of Operation Toral and Dean of Academic Studies at the Royal Military Academy Sandhurst, and Dr Edward R Flint, Head of the Defence and International Affairs Department, the Royal Military Academy Sandhurst.

Thank you very much for joining us today to share your expertise as we continue with our inquiry on the UK and Afghanistan. I remind Members and witnesses that the session is on the record. It is broadcast and transcribed. I also remind Members to declare any relevant interests they may have when they put their questions. I shall begin, as ever, by asking a general question to set the scene, and then I shall call upon my colleagues to ask more detailed questions.

What are the main elements of NATO's Resolute Support Mission's training for the Afghan National Security Forces, and how effective has the mission been?

Brigadier Ian Thomas: As a caveat, I reiterate that I was the commander of Op Toral and the Kabul Security Force throughout 2016 and into January 2017. Everything I say is rooted in my understanding at that time and it is difficult to speculate beyond that. It would be inappropriate for me to do that.

With that caveat, the Resolute Support Mission in Afghanistan was focused on some key principal areas. The train, advise, assist element is very different from the tactical-level training that we are delivering to indigenous forces in Iraq under Operation Shader, which is not at that level. The main focus was on institutional capacity building at ministerial level. The bulk of the Resolute Support Mission was concentrated in Kabul and was focused on developing capability in ministries. The UK was principally responsible for the Ministry of Interior Affairs and provided a UK two-star general to lead a small team. The US had the lead for the Ministry of Defence.

As a support note to that, there were a number of what were called train, advise, assist commands—TAACs—deployed at Afghan Corps level, the Afghan three-star level of command. They were not focused on low-level tactical training, because we had gone way beyond that with the end of the combat mission in 2014, but were all about delivering leadership training.

The UK was invited to provide a TAAC in Helmand province and it declined. Germany ran a TAAC in Mazar e-Sharif, the Italians had a TAAC in Herat province, and the US ran TAACs in Helmand, Nangarhar and Kandahar. The only exception was that a request was made to the UK in December 2015 as to whether we could provide some support for tactical training in Helmand. The Americans requested a force in the region of

150 people, including life support. The UK deployed 10, under American life support, who were in Helmand for about two months, from January through to March 2016.

The key point is that the UK's focus was at ministerial level, developing capacity in the Ministry of Interior Affairs in particular. The other thing I should add, and Ed Flint will be well placed to talk about this, is that the UK set up the Afghan National Army Officer Academy, colloquially but unhelpfully sometimes known as 'Sandhurst in the sand'. It was a British-led project, and we provided the bulk of the staff.

The main British contribution to the Resolute Support Mission in supporting training was providing the Kabul Security Force, which I commanded. It was a multinational force, predominantly American, and I can elaborate on that, should you wish. There was a slight anomaly in the UK approach in that the Afghan National Army Officer Academy was seen as a UK project. It did not fall under the methodology of headquarters Resolute Support, which divided training and capacity building into what it called essential functions. Essential Function 4, for example, was Capability and Leadership Development, and the British contribution to ANAOA fell outside that, although, as we moved through 2016, my recommendation was that it be brought within the tent because it would make certain things easier.

The UK provided individual staff officers embedded in the Resolute Support Mission headquarters, and we provided a detachment of three Puma helicopters to help to move around the people providing force protection in Kabul. That is a rather long answer, but I hope it sets the context.

The Chair: Thank you very much indeed. May I turn to Dr Flint?

Dr Edward R Flint: Good morning. It is important to consider when we get into training that there are two phases: the initial training, phase 1, which turns recruits into fully formed soldiers or officers, and phase 2 training, which is about creating specialists—the infantry officer, the engineer, the mechanical engineer. Right from the early stage of NATO's mission in Afghanistan, way back to ISAF, there was always overview of the phase 1 and phase 2 training establishments.

Very early on, an officer candidate school was created on the eastern side of Kabul called the Kabul Military Training Centre [KMTC], which was effectively designed to get people speedily through the phase 1 and phase 2 officer training programmes. It got officers through both phases in about 26 weeks, which is an incredibly fast period to get someone through learning to be an officer and then going on to become a specialist in their particular field.

Shortly after that, in 2005 or 2006, the United States set up NMAA, the National Military Academy of Afghanistan, a four-year degree course programme based on the western side of Kabul at Qargha, where eventually the Afghan National Army Officer Academy—Sandhurst—was

established. The Americans started to hand that over to NATO and, ultimately, the Turkish lead running the four-year degree programme.

Beyond that, a NATO team was overlooking other phase 1 and phase 2 soldier and officer training establishments, largely around Kabul. Some are in Mazar e-Sharif—for instance, the engineers. That oversight training team was led by a British full-colonel equivalent. It was Royal Air Force when I arrived, and went on to be Army. It was a multinational NATO team, and it went round regularly to inspect the training establishments and see what they were doing. The British were involved in the officer candidate school by supplying training officers. We were involved in the oversight of the phase 1 and phase 2 training with the NATO team. The NATO team also had an involvement with the NMAA.

In 2011, agreements were signed between President Karzai and Prime Minister David Cameron to establish the Afghan National Army Officer Academy, which was established and opened its doors in 2012. The first cadets arrived at the beginning of 2013. More than 50% of it was a British training effort, but we were joined by partners from Australia, New Zealand, Denmark and Norway, and eventually the Turks engaged in the programme.

Does that answer your question? Do you want me to add any further details?

The Chair: Thank you very much. We will have the opportunity to go into more detail later, but thank you very much for setting the scene.

Q109 **Baroness Blackstone:** Could you give us an overview of Operation Toral and the role played by the British military in the Resolute Support Mission? In doing that, could you say what you think our main contribution has been?

Brigadier Ian Thomas: Building on my last reply, the main effort in the British contribution under Op Toral was with the Kabul Security Force, which was a multinational force. Twenty-eight per cent of it was provided by the UK and 43% by the US, and depending on how you cut the numbers, it included an element—the remaining 29%—from: a Mongolian force protection company; an Australian contribution to the adviser force protection effort; an Australian mentoring team, which supported me in my role mentoring the commander of Kabul Garrison Command—an Afghan three-star; and a Danish contribution.¹

The role of the force was to provide what we called adviser force protection, which was protected mobility—moving all the advisers around the city to their various ministries and multiple tasks. We also provided what were known as guardian angels, armed personnel in a room overseeing the conduct of meetings and able to respond should there be any incident, whether green-on-blue with rogue Afghan security forces or a potential terrorist threat.

¹ The figures become 32% for the UK and 53% for the US if the 113 soldiers of the Mongolian force protection company providing inner ring base security are excluded.

As commander of the Kabul Security Force, I owned all the force protection risk for all NATO activity in Kabul. If I identified a threat, my role was effectively to close the city down and, in the vernacular, turn the routes black, which meant that nobody could move. There was clearly a tension, because risk to force equated to risk to mission. If we had any unnecessary casualties in what was deemed in domestic capitals² a non-combat mission, there would be a potential backlash against the mission and its reason for continuing. It was really important to ensure that we conducted all the advising activity as safely as possible.

The problem was that, if I identified a threat and closed the city down, it necessarily meant that we were not conducting optimum adviser activity. We always said that the mission was conditions-based, but time is a condition. We might meet our end date of the mission before we met our end state conditions, and, necessarily, any time wasted would lead to diminished Afghan capability. That was a real tension in the judgment for me to make.

It was a key role for the UK. We held all the leadership positions despite providing only 28% of the force. Uniquely, the Americans gave, under my command, a number of key assets. All the intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance assets that we had were provided by the US. The logistics were predominantly provided by the US. The base was provided by the US. The outer-ring Afghan security was bankrolled by the US. The inner-ring Mongolian force protection company was arranged by the US. Although it was British led, it was hugely enabled by the Americans, and that is a key point. I had a very big concern about command legitimacy and that we had to operate in a way that justified UK leadership, which imposed some quite interesting dynamics. That was the KSF.

As Ed said, another key component was the Afghan National Army Officer Academy in Qargha, for which we also provided force protection as the KSF. As I mentioned, the UK provided a support helicopter detachment of three Puma helicopters, of which two were on task at any one time. Again, the UK made a very disproportionate contribution. We made up something like less than 5% of the helicopter force but met 25%-plus of the taskings in Kabul. The preferred method of travel was helicopters because that kept us off the roads, where the threat from improvised explosive devices, IEDs, was very high.

In addition, we provided embedded advisers in the staff of headquarters Resolute Support. They ranged from the UK major general who was the lead in the Ministry of Interior to staff officers around the piece. Outside Operation Toral levels, we provided a UK special capabilities footprint, which I cannot talk about. We also provided mentors and advisers in an organisation called GCPSU, which supported something called Crisis Response Unit 222, the premier Afghan counterterrorist force, located in Kabul and the first responder to all complex attacks and major terrorist

² Domestic capitals of the Op RESOLUTE SUPPORT troop contributing nations (TCN)

incidents. That was mentored by the UK, with a UK full colonel as the senior adviser and a small number of staff in an advisory capability.

That broadly was our contribution to Resolute Support under the banner of Op Toral. There was a small UK national support element that did UK national logistics, ran the UK national headquarters and dealt with UK-facing issues. I had a slightly Janus-like schizophrenic experience, because I was both commander British forces, looking at the UK national line, and commander Kabul Security Force, focused on the NATO mission and working to NATO headquarters. That involved a bit of balancing. I was very conscious of my command legitimacy and that it would look very odd to the Americans if a commander of the Kabul Security Force was constantly called away on British business. I had a very good deputy who dealt with most of the UK-facing stuff. I hope that helps. I can elaborate if required.

The Chair: It is very helpful indeed. Can I turn to Dr Flint for your overview of Op Toral?

Dr Edward R Flint: It may be useful to talk about British contributions to the Afghan National Army Officer Academy. As Ian mentioned, it sat outside the NATO chain of command in sometimes a slightly uncomfortable position but was well received by the Afghans.

We can think about the UK contribution in several ways. The first was the request by the Afghans for the Sandhurst model. They wanted our model of training in part because the NMAA model took too long to process people's training. The West Point-style four-year degree model did not always produce the best results, and the officer candidate school model was too short and sharp to produce decent officers and leaders in the field. The then Chief of the General Staff in Afghanistan, General Karimi, who had been at Sandhurst in the 1960s, was consistently pushing for the Sandhurst model—the one-year model to get people through and out the other end as military people who were effective not just in being able to survive in the field but in their whole leadership model.

There was enormous emphasis on a mirror image of Sandhurst in Kabul in the first place. The first element is a model of the British approach towards training around the world that is reasonably unique, if there can be such a thing. Military forces in most countries either go down the West Point three or four-year degree model or go for the officer candidate school model. The Sandhurst model of a year to try to feed in the wider idea of officership, leadership and command is pretty unusual. There was a huge request for that. When I was there, there were about 120 mentors. It has now gone down to eight plus an academic adviser. Of that 120, over half were British. The others came from Denmark and Australia, the next two largest contributors, and there were individuals from Norway and New Zealand.

We also contributed, as Ian mentioned, to the force protection wrap that went around our operations at Qargha. That was shared with the Australians and a small New Zealand contingent, but there was a

company of UK troops from whichever was the latest battalion out there, to provide us with protection around the site. The UK provided pre-deployment training at Sandhurst for everyone going out to the Afghan National Army Officer Academy. That was a two-week course to get everyone on message for what we were doing there and the training standards we were trying to produce. For most Brits, it was reasonably straightforward. For the Australians and the Danes, who use a rather different training model, it was useful for them to understand what our approach was.

Over the years, Sandhurst has trained Afghan officer cadets, and at any one time we have nine officer cadets at RMAS. We have been doing that since about 2006. There were one or two Afghans before that moment in time, but we have had substantial numbers, by our standards, of Afghan cadets coming through Sandhurst. Most of them go back to organisations such as the police, the Ministry of Interior Affairs, and the National Directorate of Security. Some go back to the army; indeed, some of those officers have ended up at Qargha at the Afghan National Army Officer Academy having been trained in the Sandhurst ways and they try to push the Sandhurst way at Qargha.

In many ways, our contribution was substantial. From the Afghan point of view, although we always call it the Afghan National Army Officer Academy or Qargha, the Afghans always called what we were doing Sandhurst. It was the model, the description, that they wanted to use, hence people talking about 'Sandhurst in the sand', although actually we were at 2,000 metres in the mountains overlooking four universities on the outskirts of one of the largest and fastest-growing cities in Asia. Never mind about that; the sand was nowhere near us.

Q110 Lord Reid of Cardowan: Thank you very much, gentlemen. As we are discussing military affairs, I declare that I was a former Secretary of State for Defence. I may have come across you in some capacity at that stage.

Other witnesses have raised the question of our contribution to what is unhelpfully called 'Sandhurst in the sand', and you have already given us great depth of detail on that, but there is one area that I would like to probe. You said several times that what is being done there fell outside NATO. I think Ian Thomas said it fell outside the tent or outside the criteria. Could you explain in a little more detail what is meant by that, whether there are any disadvantages in being outside those structures or concepts, and if anything is being done to equalise and bring it within them?

Brigadier Ian Thomas: I felt the differentiation quite acutely in my schizophrenic existence. The UK main effort was ANAOA, and therefore as Commander British Forces I wholeheartedly supported it and pushed it very hard. As commander Kabul Security Force, a NATO officer, it made a disproportionate call on my finite resources. At any one time, as the Kabul Security Force, we could typically service 80% of the demands placed on us. There were never enough troops to task.

The problem with ANAOA being outside the NATO essential function focus was that it always looked as if it was a slightly British special project and, because I had one of my five³ manoeuvre companies permanently based at Qargha, which effectively did nothing but support Qargha. On any given day, within the city we had 12 task lines, only two of which were British; the other 10 were American. My American subordinate commander felt that we were unduly resourcing ANAOA, because all requests for support from Qargha were always resourced.

For all the other task lines, we had to disappoint people, but there is a contextual point that I think is important. When I deployed at the beginning of 2016, the mission was envisaged to end in December 2016. I was told I would be turning the lights out. The Kabul Security Force was typically described as being built in flight; there were short-term fixes implemented which were deemed acceptable because it [the KSF] was only going to have to operate until December 2016.

Key events occurred in late summer/autumn 2016, notably the Warsaw NATO conference and the Brussels donor conference. What came out of that, as General Nicholson, the commander of Resolute Support, said, is that the nations gave us four more years and we needed to refocus our efforts with a longer horizon. The UK started a dialogue about how we could take the mission forward and what we would need to do with the KSF. My point was always that we needed to increase the UK contribution.⁴

I have just checked my notes on an important conference in September 2016. The key was improving Afghan performance, and General Mick Nicholson laid out a four-year strategic plan, developed with President Ghani, about where Afghanistan was going to go and what we needed to do with the ANDSF. We were on the strategic defensive. It then moved into limited offensive and then decisive operations. The key to enabling it was improving the quality of Afghan leadership, and it was recognised at the time that the bulk of the Afghan junior leaders who were fighting were graduates of ANAOA.

There seemed to me an alignment whereby we could bring ANAOA into Essential Function 4, command and leadership development, which was absolutely the top of Nicholson's priority list. I could then legitimately put that in my top 20% of demands and support it, thereby supporting both the UK national effort and the NATO effort. The two would be aligned, and we would be less vulnerable to challenges that we were supporting a pet British project. That was all agreed.

³ One UK, one UK/AUS, three US companies. The mixed UK/AUS company was permanently based at Qargha.

⁴ The Permanent Joint Headquarters (PJHQ) staff supported the need to put Op TORAL on a "firmer footing". In time, the UK increased its contribution to the KSF to deploy a full battalion (an uplift from 2 companies previously) to relieve US forces which were redeployed on other missions and tasks outside the KSF

When I left, in January 2017, it was still in negotiation but agreed in principle, so I have to be very careful about trying to give a view on where it is now. I put as a recommendation in my post-op report that we should increase by at least a company of another six task lines to meet the adviser force protection demand signal and at the same time meet UK national interests. The stars aligned in a helpful way. I cannot give you a definitive answer, just the intent that I had towards the end of 2016, which I hope helps.

Dr Edward R Flint: At worker bee level, the relationship was very productive. NATO provided our IT infrastructure and support. I worked very closely with the StratCom people to set up courses for training in things such as working with the media and communications more broadly. Initially, there was a NATO team based at Qargha overseeing all the phase 1 and phase 2 training establishments. At a practical level, it worked, and we bounced off each other in a very positive way and engaged with each other. I can understand that at a more senior level there may have been some frictions and concerns, but at a practical training level we rarely bumped into issues.

Moreover, a lot of the infrastructure that was built at Qargha, such as the new academy buildings, was funded by the United Kingdom; initially, there were tents put up by the Brits, but eventually we moved into brand new buildings. We funded a large part of it, but the actual work was overseen by CSTC-A⁵ and the US Army Corps of Engineers (albeit with UK involvement) and was very much seen as more of a NATO project. It was quite a confusing picture in many ways.

It was responding to the Afghan call for a Sandhurst. When one thinks about delivering officer training and an officer training institution and building the institution, one should think long term. We did some interesting research when we arrived at Qargha, looking at previous attempts to set up Sandhursts around the world, mostly after the Second World War. There have been about 10 attempts at setting up a Sandhurst somewhere (and many other versions based on substantial UK support whether in country or in the UK or a mix). Half of them have been unadulterated failures, I am sorry to say. The ones that worked best were those we engaged with for over a decade, normally involving an individual who was there for substantial periods, a golden thread character.

The Pakistan Military Academy has Ingall Hall, named after Brigadier Ingall. The Indian Military Academy has Chetwode Hall, named after Major General Chetwode. They acted as the golden thread characters. In other academies, such as those in Jordan, Oman or Malaysia, there is considerable success, and that involved a longer-term vision.

When Karzai and Cameron agreed to creating the Afghan National Army Officer Academy at Qargha, based around Sandhurst, it was a 10-year

⁵ The Combined Security Transition Command – Afghanistan, a multinational, US-led military organisation.

agreement at the very least. Even now, as things are getting to a point of maturity in the development of ANAOA, we consider that it is a relationship that we will continue, as we continue our relationship with other military academies around the world that we helped to set up. To some extent, one has to think beyond the immediate needs if we are to have something that is successful, and a legacy that people can point to and is regarded as successful.

Q111 Lord Alton of Liverpool: Brigadier Thomas and Dr Flint, thank you very much for talking us through challenges such as command legitimacy and differentiation. Could you tell us what have been the most challenging aspects and obstacles encountered in delivering the training and support to the Afghan National Security Forces that you have been talking about, especially through Operation Toral? How are they being addressed by the UK and our NATO partners?

Brigadier Ian Thomas: There was a very specific challenge that we faced. Conscious of security classification, I will be as circumspect as I can. I mentioned earlier the tension between the need to protect advisers while at the same time delivering the advising effect and the imperative to minimise NATO casualties while still operating. As a commander, I had pretty good ISR—intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance—and understanding of some of the complex threats that were coming into Kabul, which is a relatively non-permissive environment for complex attacks. It takes an awful lot of insurgent effort to pull off an attack in Kabul, but if the juice is worth the squeeze, they will try.

We developed a methodology to look at where there would be an alignment of high-profile events in Kabul that might deliver an information propaganda effect if there was a successful enemy attack. That was where we keyed our focus. There were limitations on ISR assets compared with what people had been used to in the combat ops campaign. We did not have full understanding, but we had some visibility of threats coming in. I had a fairly blunt instrument, which was to turn off advising, get people off the routes and cease activity. The challenge was that a number of those attacks tend to go silent in the execution phase; once they are prepared and ready to launch, you sometimes lose fidelity on them.

I had to work out how to track the threats. I could close the routes, but the challenge was to know when to open them again, because the fact that the threat had not gone bang did not mean that it was decisively attenuated. It could just be waiting us out. There was a pressure on me to reopen the routes, because people said, "Well, nothing has happened". The challenge was to work out the appropriate risk calibration to say that we thought the threat might have attenuated. For example, we tried to work out how long you could keep the suicide bomber active on the line of departure; mentally, when did they start to lose their morale and their commitment to the task?

That, at tactical level, but with huge strategic impact if I got it wrong, was my principal challenge, and it focused the minds of pretty much

everybody in the Kabul Security Force. We developed a way of mitigating it, through a community of interests of what I called the threat avoiders who were us, on behalf of NATO, the threat understanders who were us and all the other intelligence agencies, and the threat disruptors over whom I had no authority because I did not have, and did not need to have, what we would call left-of-the-bang disrupt capabilities.

There were US and other partnered organisations and NATO-partnered SOF⁶ organisations that could act vicariously in our interest if they understood and shared the problem that we all faced. Developing that methodology provided some mitigation. We never got it completely right and some attacks went ahead, but during the year we were there, thankfully, no NATO advisers lost their lives.

We considered that to be mission success. We had a couple of near misses. During that period, 2016, it was particularly difficult and we did not see everything coming. In fact, there was an attack in April on the NDS,⁷ which resulted in the single largest loss of life in Kabul in one go. Islamic State, which was a new development in 2016, started to develop high-profile complex attacks.

From a personal point of view and as commander of the KSF, the UK principal focus was managing and calibrating that risk, trying to balance all the competing demands and maintaining the mission, but at a safe level.

Dr Edward R Flint: I shall focus very much on events at Qargha and the Afghan National Army Officer Academy. The first challenge was between what was wanted and what was needed. What was wanted was Sandhurst. What was needed was something that kept the DNA of Sandhurst but was adapted to Afghan needs. Within about six months of opening, we found that some of the syllabus was totally inappropriate for Afghan requirements.

There was a very good staff officer, Ian Turner, who came out and led on a training needs analysis. He asked basic questions such as, "What are the biggest killers of Afghan soldiers and officers during operations?" Unsurprisingly, it was IEDs and ambushes. We then started to shift our training at Qargha towards things that were more appropriate and most useful to the Afghan National Army. At times, there was a bit of pressure from certain sources in NATO that we should focus the training on conducting strike operations, arrest operations and things like that.

Our view was that most Afghan army units were simply holding ground, and therefore, it was about making sure they did that job particularly well rather than leading the ANA into the exotic corners of military operations. There was an adjustment that went through and that needed the buy-in of the Afghan Ministry of Defence and senior military leaders. It worked.

⁶ Special Operations Forces.

⁷ The National Directorate of Security - the national intelligence and security service of Afghanistan.

By the end of the first course, counter-ambush drills, counter-IED, and working out of forward operating bases—FOBs—was part and parcel of the training that we were delivering.

Within weeks of the first officers being commissioned and then going through phase 2 training and out into the field, we received reports that, rather than checkpoints and forward operating bases being deserted when attacks came from the Taliban, Islamic State and other groups, the Sandhurst-trained officers were holding their ground and taking the fight back. There was friction, although that is probably too grand a phrase. There was a relationship between what was wanted and what was needed, and we moved that forward.

The bigger issue that we bumped into was how the Afghan army managed its human resources. The first issue was that people would be posted to a specific job in the academy. You did not always get a square peg in a square hole in their capabilities to fulfil the job, so gradually, with the support of the Afghans—indeed, much of the time the Afghans were making the changes themselves—we shifted people, so that square pegs ended up in square holes around the academy. Every so often, the Afghan Ministry of Defence would say, “No, no, everyone should be back in their PID⁸. That would unravel things for us for a moment, so a lot of work was then pointed up and out of the academy over to the Resolute Support headquarters to try to temper that enthusiasm.

We then went through another phase when the Afghan armed forces retired a large number of senior older members. Because the average age of many of the senior officials at Qargha was on the older side, they started to get pensioned off and retired from the army, so we ended up with a bit of a gap. We did not necessarily have to start again, but it caused a certain amount of bump along the way to try to make things work. The HR system was not always the most helpful.

The other thing that we were always pushing for was one of the things that makes Sandhurst in Camberley work; we have new staff, particularly on the military side, every two years. From the latest reports I have been receiving from people I know out in theatre, that is starting to make headway. New staff bring to Sandhurst a level of knowledge, enthusiasm and commitment that pushes Sandhurst along. It develops the place. It moves the syllabus along. It moves how we train people along. The problem we discovered with some of the Afghan posting systems was that people would be posted for life to a particular location. While that is quite good for elements of continuity in a training establishment, you also need fresh blood, as it were, to come in to act as a catalyst for change and to move things along.

When I was there, we asked Corps commanders out in the field to send their better officers back to Qargha to come on the staff, even on a temporary basis. They were reluctant to do that for obvious reasons; they needed all the officers they could get, particularly the good officers

⁸ PID – position identity number

they could keep hold of, to run operations in the field. Now that the 5,000th cadet has gone through the ANAOA at Qargha, and 75% of operational junior commanders have been through Qargha, we have a head of steam and there is greater capacity to start getting officers back to Qargha acting as a fresh boost to move things along. Perhaps it reflects the idea that you cannot have everything all at once. These are 10 to 15-year projects to get the results you need, with good officership as well as an institution that is self-perpetuating and does not ossify, and moves with the times. Those are the challenges.

I had personal challenges at Qargha. I wanted to meet people from the university to try to kick-start a higher education programme. Because of the force protection issues, that became increasingly impossible. I wanted to get out to the think tanks. Part of institution building is drawing in ideas from other places, such as universities, think tanks, and other academies; you swap ideas. From my point of view, physically getting around the place was problematic. From the Afghan point of view, they often needed specific permission, a so-called cipher, from someone often quite senior—as high as the Chief of the General Staff—to engage with such things as think tanks and universities.

There was an element of control of people's access to each other, even of phase 1 and phase 2 training establishments talking to each other: "Is the product we are sending to you at phase 2 any good?" Phase 2 going back to phase 1: "Can you do a bit more of this please?" Things we do instinctively and organically at Sandhurst in the UK took quite a lot of effort to organise. That is where the relationship with the NATO team was so productive at worker bee level in putting a bit of a push at the right level in the Ministry of Defence to open the doors to allow Afghans to talk to other Afghans about training needs and things like that. That is my perspective.

The Chair: Thank you very much indeed. I appreciate that in giving such a depth of information you have addressed some of the issues that are scheduled to be raised in our next two questions, so I ask Lord Hannay and Baroness Fall to put their questions immediately one after the other and I invite you, Brigadier and Dr Flint, to answer both together. I appreciate that some of the ground has been covered.

Q112 Lord Hannay of Chiswick: Thank you for the very interesting testimony so far. I spent two years serving in Afghanistan, from 1961 to 1963, which you will be interested to know was when the Qargha site was first developed, as a picnic and pleasure ground with, I think, subsequently a golf course.

This question moves back from the granular, which has been very helpful, to something a bit wider. To what extent has capacity building and support for the Afghan National Security Forces been co-ordinated with work to develop the Afghan Ministries of Defence and of Interior Affairs? Does it cover counterterrorism activities both by the Afghan National Security Forces and by the Defence and Interior Ministries, thus enabling them to support Afghanistan's rather wider objectives in counterterrorism

and security?

Q113 **Baroness Fall:** My question goes back to what we have already discussed about the general assessment of the state of the Afghan National Security Forces at the moment. In particular, what is your assessment of the ongoing support that is needed from NATO and the US at quite a critical time?

Brigadier Ian Thomas: I shall reinforce Ed's last answer, which, hopefully, will help on those two questions. During the period I know about—September 2016—when General Nicholson and President Ghani had just developed and published the new Afghan four-year strategy, which everything we did would be nested within, the British contribution at ANAOA, or the ANAOA contribution to the ANDSF, was riding high, to the point where, once Sandhurst had been mentioned, lots of senior American officers came up to me and said, "Hey, we gotta have some of this Sandhurst stuff. It's really good. The only people fighting are the graduates coming out of ANAOA". That was really gratifying to hear, and it provided the basis for the development.

In wider integration, at headquarters Resolute Support level, there were clearly staff mechanisms in what was known as the battle rhythm, battle procedure, where those efforts were supposed to be aligned. One can be sceptical sometimes about how effective they were. There was the weekly Commanders' Shared Visualisation⁹ where we all stood up and gave our overview of our particular areas. Any major points of misalignment would be then subject to the commander's guidance. For example, the UK lead in the Ministry of the Interior was a two-star general; he would give his bit and they would then discuss how best to sequence effort. From a procedural point of view, there were mechanisms in place.

This is beyond my competence, but it is fair to say that at national level there was clearly UK national input. The thing we have not touched on, which might be anticipated by a later question, is that for the Americans, there were two missions in Afghanistan. There was the national counterterrorism mission, centred on US forces Afghanistan (USFOR-A) with the bulk of strike assets in Bagram, and there was the US support to NATO, and sometimes it was quite difficult to see how they interplayed. While we were there, IS started to make its appearance both in Kabul and in the east, and there was a series of US strike operations—the Green Sword series—where US special forces and US conventional forces, mainly rangers, were fighting al-Qaeda, Islamic State and the Taliban. That was a US forces Afghanistan mission that was complementary to the NATO mission.

In answering a question about CT,¹⁰ I have to be very careful for security reasons. The UK provided mentorship and leadership in CRU 222, the

⁹⁹ This was a weekly VTC/HQ RS gathering where all commanders and staff updated the collective on what was happening in their areas (including all the deployed TAACs in the various provinces); and we all projected likely developments. The Commander used this as his opportunity to ensure all the force understood his thinking, intent and priorities.

¹⁰ Counter-terrorism.

crisis response unit, while not actually taking part in operations, and that was a significant contribution to counterterrorism within Kabul. There is the Ministry of Interior Affairs. There is the National Directorate of Security, the NDS, and there are various police and Afghan MoD contributions. The full picture was not visible to me. I was aware of all the discrete parts, but how they nested together took place at a level above that which I saw. I was very conscious of both NATO and predominantly American-driven interests within that. Occasionally, various NATO nations bumped up against USFOR-A missions, and that had to be reconciled. That is an unsatisfactory answer to the CT question, but it is a very complex mosaic.

On the general assessment of the ANDSF, I can only speak from the perspective of 2016. Towards the end of that period, there was cause for optimism, but there was also a sense that we needed to make sure that the capability was put on a firm foundation. For example, at that stage, we saw for the first time the Afghan air force conduct its own close air support missions where, with coalition mentoring, it went through the entirety of the targeting process, throughout the kill chain, and delivered ordnance to effect, on target, in a way that had not been possible before.

That was probably the headline development. There were developments in delivering rotary wing capability. The key force was the Afghan special forces who were then about 17,000-strong, but they were conducting 70% of the Afghan National Army offensive operations. There was a real concern—I speak having seen CRU 222 in action—that they took a very high attrition rate in both physical and mental casualties. They were constantly engaged. Although that was achievable and sustainable in the short term, a lot of work had to be done to ensure that capability was sustainable in the long term.

In the UK Army, we talk about defence lines of development. You do not just look at the shiny bit of kit. You look at the training, the manning, the staffing, the infrastructure, the maintenance and the spares. The real challenge for the Afghans to develop the ANDSF was to ensure that they took a holistic approach to all of that and did not just invest money in the shiny bit, the weapon, without having a full system to ensure that it was properly operational and sustainable over a period of time. I hope that helps, at least a little.

Dr Edward R Flint: On Lord Hannay's question, Ian has said more than I could possibly ever talk about. I did not have much sight of that kind of level.

On the question of broader capability, I will focus on Qargha. One sees increasingly the ability for the academy to generate its own ideas and to sustain itself. There remain issues. Afghan logistics can be in a very difficult place, not necessarily because of lack of resources but perhaps through the organisation and planning resources. That was something we often bumped into [*Inaudible.*] in exercise planning, for instance.

Getting resources ready for an exercise would often be done at the last minute by mobile phone rather than the UK way or the NATO way. Most NATO armies conduct deep planning and preparation and things like that. There are gaps. Nevertheless, my take on it would be that it is an organisation that is sustainable in its delivery of trained officers. The most recent developments, which look at bringing together NMAA and ANAOA in the same officer pipeline, is even more positive; the suggestion is that all Afghan army officers will go through ANAOA and a few will then be selected to go to NMAA for a four-year degree programme. In other words, all Afghan officers will go through a leadership programme of the quality that we feel we have encouraged and helped to deliver.

More broadly, although it is slightly embarrassing that the word Sandhurst is used so repeatedly, the leadership model that is identified with the Sandhurst model is seen to have utility in other parts of Afghan government, society, and leadership more generally. There is potential. It is how that will emerge. Certainly from an army point of view, as regards delivering good-quality leaders, we are increasingly moving to a position where there is consistent delivery model in the Afghan army and a sustainable model. That goes back to the idea of the long-term project. I do not see anyone at Sandhurst wanting to cut the ties with Qargha in the short term. It is something that we want to keep sustaining to help the Afghans to help themselves.

The Chair: Thank you very much. We have been given a small extension of time for our broadcast session, although it only gives us another seven minutes. I will turn to Lord Grocott for his question. Sadly, we are not able to reach Baroness Smith, but a lot of her question has been covered. If it is not too burdensome, we will revert to our two witnesses after this meeting to see if there is anything that could be added by way of written contribution.

Q114 **Lord Grocott:** What is the balance of personnel between the different contributors to the Resolute Support Mission? As far as US involvement is concerned, Brigadier Thomas, you said earlier that you could describe it as there being two American missions in Afghanistan. To what extent is the US mission in respect of Resolute Support best described as the lead partner, with support from NATO Allies? To what extent is there a common syllabus for training by the different allies?

The Chair: That is something meaty for our last few minutes.

Brigadier Ian Thomas: I emphasise that I speak from the perspective of 2016. At that time, the US was far and away the predominant partner in Resolute Support. To the UK's chagrin, we had dropped to something like the eighth largest troop contributor, behind the Germans, the Italians, the Turks, and a few others. Clearly, that was a change from the combat ops of Op Herrick, when we were the second largest contributor. It was quite difficult sometimes to identify the balance between US personnel allocated to USFOR-A mission, the national mission, and Resolute Support. It is difficult. Sometimes, they did both. There were specialist capabilities that were absolutely focused on the main US

enduring counterterrorism mission. There was a massive US embassy and all sorts of capabilities in there that were focused on national effort. That is quite difficult.

On a common syllabus, I go back to the point I made at the beginning; Resolute Support is less about training, and more about train, advise and assist. It is much more about the advise and the assist at ministerial level. There are several advise and assist commands that are delegated to three-star level. That is a high level of command. It was all about mentoring the commanders, rather than training soldiers as we would have done during Op Herrick, as we did in Iraq under Operation Telic, and as is happening in various places under Op Shader.

The common syllabus question is a bit difficult to answer. There are different approaches within a NATO-approved methodology. My experience in NATO is that nations naturally interpret the common doctrine differently. There would have been a common doctrine. The Italians would probably have had a slightly different approach in Herat from the Germans in Mazar e-Sharif and from the Americans in Kandahar, so it is quite difficult to give you a firm answer. The requirements and the threat profile in each of those provinces is different. There are national caveats for each of the nations on what they would see as acceptable to deliver their training. Some nations are typically more risk averse than others and probably would go "outside the wire" less than others. I clearly do not want to cast aspersions because there are very good reasons behind all of those things, but there are inevitable national differences in the NATO framework. I hope that helps a little.¹¹

The Chair: Thank you very much. I am afraid time is our enemy. This is where we have to call an end to our evidence session. Thank you very much to our witnesses, Brigadier Thomas and Dr Flint, for your expert contribution on both military and security issues. You have given us vital information for our collection for our inquiry report. We are coming, more or less, to the end of our evidence taking, and are waiting to hear from Ministers at the Foreign and Commonwealth Development Office and at the Ministry of Defence. Thank you for providing us with your information today.

¹¹ ERF – I would only add that we went to great lengths at ANAOA to make sure that our ideas did not conflict with other training delivery in other establishments – this was where the NATO team was so useful in providing context. Things like Counter-IED training used the standard NATO delivered model – not a different UK approach even though we would inevitably think ours the better model. It was more important to avoid a 'tower of Babel' effect. Where we added value was in the leadership models we developed, the emphasis on the leader on and off operations, and advice on institution building.