

## **Encirclement of Patrol Base Armagh, Helmand Province, July-August 2008**

### **Key Points**

In early July 2008, a British infantry company based in Sangin set up a patrol base south of the town, along a major insurgent transit route. Within days, the insurgents attacked the outpost, known as Patrol Base Armagh, and attempted to cut it off from the company headquarters downtown.

They laid IEDs along the outpost's supply routes and harassed its troops by firing small arms and RPGs from different directions. The insurgents managed to pin British forces down in the outpost and move around the position to the south.

The attacks on Patrol Base Armagh are notable because, rather than attempting to overrun the outpost in a direct assault, the insurgents cut its resupply and tied down its troops – eventually forcing the British to close the base.

### **Insurgents Encircle Patrol Base Armagh**

On or around 11 July 2008, two platoons of Ranger Company, 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion, Royal Irish Regiment (1RIR) established a patrol base two kilometers south of their main base at the Sangin District Center. The outpost was located on the eastern edge of a lush, heavily cultivated area known as the “green zone”.

The purpose of the position, later called Patrol Base Armagh, was to stop the movement of insurgents and IED facilitators transiting between Kandahar and Pakistan to the East, and northern Helmand and Qala-e Gaz to the west. Several Afghan Army checkpoints along Highway 611 kept most insurgents off the main road around Sangin, forcing them to move by foot through the green zone along the Helmand River.

Patrol Base Armagh was surrounded by open fields with numerous scattered buildings within 500 meters on all sides, as well as several orchards and tree lines nearby. It had been a former Taliban safe house, and was already heavily fortified.

Within days, insurgents began laying IEDs along the main routes connecting the outpost to the main base in downtown Sangin. They then fired small arms and RPGs at the base from various buildings nearby, most of them from the east. These attacks occurred at least every few days. The insurgents also ambushed patrols attempting to re-supply the outpost and clear IEDs en route.

Most attacks on the patrol base involved a heavy burst of accurate RPG fire, followed by less accurate small arms fire. The insurgents then broke contact and abandoned their positions. They often fired from the same buildings or concealed positions. The

insurgents attacked in 3-6 three-man teams spread out in different firing locations. If one was injured or killed, the other two would evacuate the casualty.

Throughout this period, the insurgents made threatening statements over their radios, knowing that the troops at the base were listening. For example, they would exaggerate their numbers or say a suicide bomber was on his way.

When moving large amounts of men or material into or out of the green zone, the insurgents laid multiple IEDs the night before to slow reinforcements out of the district center. They then fixed the troops at the patrol base through a sustained attack from multiple directions, while facilitators moved around the outpost to the immediate south.

Most of the mines laid between the district center and the patrol base were command-wire or pressure plate IEDs. Many were buried in the soft ground along footpaths, which required daily clearing missions that were slow and painstaking – keeping British troops from doing clearing or disruption operations around Patrol Base Armagh.

Several IED cells were reportedly based in a wadi near the outpost. Soldiers of 1RIR conducted several missions against these cells, but were not able to push them out of the area.

### **1RIR Closes the Patrol Base**

There was only one company of troops based in Sangin, with responsibility for the town of 60,000 and its surrounding area. The company had three platoons and a fire support group. Initially, 1RIR sent two platoons to man Patrol Base Armagh, but later recalled one back to the district center, leaving only one platoon to guard the outpost.

The British eventually closed the patrol base in mid August, about a month after setting it up. Their main reason was that there were insufficient resources to clear IEDs along the route to the outpost, which made it impossible to adequately re-supply the position. During the month that the outpost was operational, insurgents laid more than 90 IEDs along its supply routes. There was also concern that with only one platoon at the patrol base, it was in danger of being over-run.

After the base was closed, there was a substantial fall in the amount of intelligence coming in about insurgent activity south of Sangin. There was also a significant increase in attacks on Afghan army checkpoints along Highway 611 and in downtown Sangin.

### **Conclusion**

The attacks on Patrol Base Armagh demonstrated that the insurgents around Sangin in the summer of 2008 were capable of thinking strategically and focusing substantial effort on protecting a key transit route.

They succeeded in encircling the base, tying down one of 1RIR's three platoons in constant counter-IED missions, and fixing another platoon inside the outpost. That left 1RIR with only one platoon left to protect its headquarters at the district center and do occasional patrols downtown.

The insurgents did not attempt to over-run the base, nor did they appear focused on causing casualties through IED strikes. The attacks served more as a diversion to prevent British forces from interdicting movement south of Patrol Base Armagh.

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