

# NATO and the Politics of Opium

By Anthony C Heaford, April 2022 – British army 2009-13, No. 30088729

I know NATO was complicit in Afghanistan's opium business because I was there, guarding opium harvesting on Afghan government land by NATO's main operating base in Helmand, Camp Bastion.

I took these photos in April 2012, just two weeks into my first operational deployment with the British army and during my first guard duty on Camp Bastion's airfield.

These poppy fields were irrigated exclusively with purified water from inside NATO's Camp Bastion.

On exactly the same day one hundred and seventy other British soldiers were on Op Shafuq, a poppy eradication mission fifteen miles south, in Nad Ali.

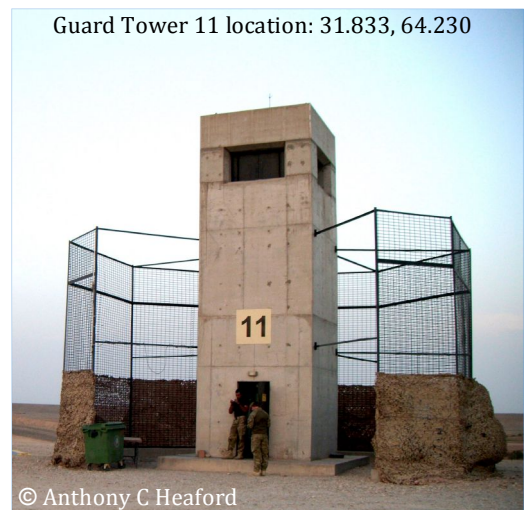


Camp Bastion airfield perimeter defences

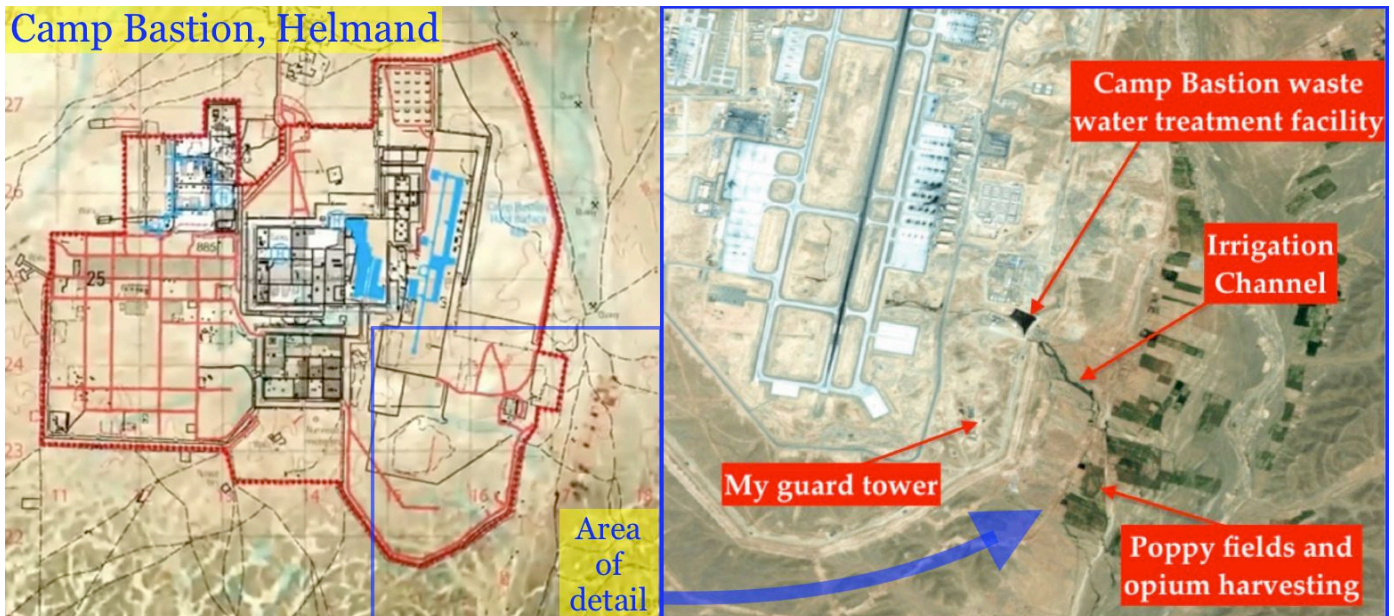


I was in Helmand from April to October 2012; a British army reserve mechanic on a six-month NATO deployment. During my first guard tower duty on 21/22 April, the Royal Air Force Regiment (RAF Regt) Sergeant told us that Afghan security forces had been harassing the farmers in Now-Abad village in the valley besides the airfield. Our orders were that if any Afghan forces approached Now-Abad village or even entered the valley we should alert the QRF (Quick Reaction Force) by radio and they would hopefully intercept them.

I only noticed the opium harvesting after the initial briefing. When I pointed it out to the RAF Regt Sergeant during one of his routine visits he shrugged his shoulders and appeared to be embarrassed when he replied, "Yeah, I know."



Camp Bastion, Helmand



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The scorch marks on this compound's wall (far right on the first page panoramic image) likely show where the opium was 'cooked'. One hectare of poppy may produce four kilos of processed opium with an average 'farm gate' price around \$250/kilogram. The Helmand poppy field harvested under my watch was about five hectares. Twenty kilos of processed opium (farm gate value \$5,000) could produce two and a half kilos of pure heroin, its ultimate street value in the hundreds of thousands of dollars.



There was an incident in Now-Abad that required a QRF visit in May 2012, just a few weeks after the opium harvest had finished. A group of armed men approaching the village's main compound (directly in front of Tower 11, pictured below) were warned away by an almost casual exchange of gunfire that started from the compound. No casualties were reported and the matter appeared to resolve itself. I did not witness this incident but heard both formal and informal first-hand accounts.

On my next guard duty the RAF Regt Sergeant told us a search of Now-Abad's main compound had revealed a suspected illegally held assault rifle and a single shot rifle. Despite suspicions about the firearms-certificates' authenticity, our Afghan neighbours were allowed to keep the weapons.



The timing of the gunfire confrontation besides our main operating base was interesting, happening just a few weeks after the opium harvest there had finished. The unwelcome armed visitors were likely the Afghan security forces based in Camp Shorabak (an Afghan camp annexed to Camp Bastion) hoping for a cut of the poppy farmer's estimated \$5,000 of illicit income.

Washir district governor Mohammed Daoud Noorzai was responsible for Now-Abad village as it and Camp Bastion were both in Washir district. Governor Noorzai is pictured here in August 2011, during a meeting with NATO and Afghan commanders besides Camp Bastion. This and previous meetings were about security, development, poppy cultivation and replacement crops in Now-Abad and other nearby settlements.



The security concerns I tried to raise from Tower 11 that summer were repeatedly dismissed by the guard commander at the other end of my radio with the same assurance, "Don't worry about it, Mohammed Daoud controls this valley".

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Governor Mohammed Daoud Noorzai was clearly a close British ally. But going off my April 2012 orders to stop any Afghan forces entering the valley by Bastion's airfield, and the May 2012 exchange of gunfire in Now-Abad village, the Washir district governor was not an ally of the Afghan security forces based in Camp Shorabak.

The highest-ranking NATO officers I personally know to have seen this opium harvesting and heard my orders were my Battalion's second-in-command, a Major and a Captain accompanying him. They visited Tower 11 when I was on watch on 22 April. I repeated the tower briefing to them before pointing to the opium harvesting and asking if they could see what the men were doing. Both officers responded by laughing, then declaring they could not see anything before hurriedly exiting the guard tower.

The highest-ranking NATO officers to publicly acknowledged the poppy fields besides Camp Bastion's airfield are British Lieutenant General David Capewell and Major General Sturdevant of the US Marine Corp.

Lt Gen Capewell was the officer assigned to give evidence to the April 2014 parliamentary inquiry into the Taliban's devastating attack on Camp Bastion's airfield, in September 2012. British Lt Gen Capewell characterized the decision to allow poppy cultivation so close to the perimeter fence as:

***"... a minor tactical error  
[which contributed to the enemy's success]."***

<https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201314/cmselect/cmdfence/830/830.pdf>

Two weeks after giving his less than forthright evidence to the defence committee Lt Gen Capewell became Sir David Capewell in the Queen's New Year honors list.

US Major General Sturdevant told a somewhat different tale, one of frustration with Afghan security forces inability to address the poppy farming by our main base. Did he really not know that British forces had allowed the compound near the poppy field to keep suspected illegal weapons to defend themselves from Afghan security force's interference? When giving evidence to the US military's August 2013 inquiry into the Taliban's airfield raid, Maj Gen Sturdevant said:

***"We literally had poppy growing right up against the perimeter fence. That was another thing that Major General Gurganus tried to take action on, but he wasn't able to accomplish that. It was because the Afghans had to do it. We weren't allowed to. The biggest external threat to the base came from there."***

<https://www.hqmc.marines.mil/Portals/142/USCENTCOM%20Bastion%20Attack%20Investigation%20Redacted%2015-6%20Report.pdf>



Lieutenant General David Capewell  
British Marine



Major General Gregg Sturdevant  
United States Marine Corp

When that 'external threat' materialized in September 2012, the US military suffered its biggest combat loss of aircraft since the Vietnamese Tet Offensive of 1968. The Taliban decimated a Harrier jump-jet squadron on the airfield, causing \$400-million of damage in total. Two US Marines were killed in action and all but one of the fifteen attackers were killed. The US Generals responsible for securing Camp Leatherneck (the US base annexed on to Camp Bastion's airfield) were forced to retire immediately.