

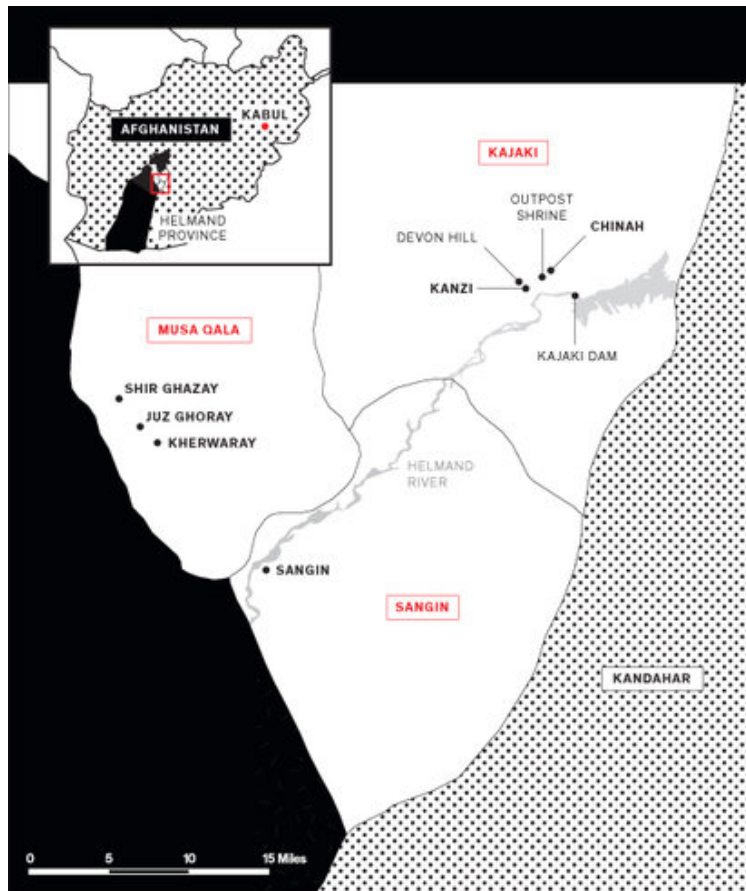
Military Resistance 10B3

**“It Was Vietnam,” A Former
Platoon Commander Told Me.
“Every Day We Were Fighting
For Our Lives”**



Staff Sgt. Vincent Bell, preparing to go on patrol in Kajaki on Nov. 30, 2011. He was killed later that day by an I.E.D. Battery G 2/11

“After The Ambush On Devon Hill, The Marines Suspended Further Patrols Into The North”
“We Can Spend Another 10 Years In Afghanistan And Still Be Fighting Like That”
“No Insurgents, Only Traces Of Them Everywhere”
“That’s The Wild West Up There. We Won’t Ever Go Up There”



Helmand Province: The New York Times Company

Comment:T

This newsletter contains one article, long but unusually valuable.

Leaving aside the stupid happy talk from U.S. commanders, busy putting lipstick on a pig, this article presents an unusually detailed first hand account of the grinding, deadly day-to-day combat in Afghanistan from the point of view of foreign soldiers living and dying in a trap not of their making.

[Thanks to Clancy Sigal, who sent this in. He writes: "This is a long piece. But buried in there is a quote that so many people are getting killed from IEDs because the Marines are there in the first place."]

February 1, 2012 By LUKE MOGELSON, The New York Times Company [Excerpts]

For years, in the village of Juz Ghoray, at the remote fringes of the Musa Qala District in northern Helmand Province, the Taliban enjoyed free rein, collecting taxes from local poppy farmers and staging attacks on any foreign patrol that moved within shooting range of an abrupt desert prominence called Ugly Hill.

After a Marine unit found nine I.E.D.'s hidden beneath Ugly Hill's scarred and caverned faces last year, coalition forces seldom ventured near it. Until one night this October, when members of Echo Company, from the Second Battalion, Fourth Marines — known since Vietnam as the Magnificent Bastards — quietly sneaked into Juz Ghoray and posted signs on people's doors and windows.

Their idea was to co-opt the infamous Taliban practice of intimidating government sympathizers with night letters threatening execution. The Marines' signs were bordered with the nation's colors, and in Pashto and Dari they announced: "The Afghan National Security Forces are coming."

Two weeks later, about 60 members of Echo Company, along with 30 Afghan National Army soldiers, traveled on foot through the night and took Ugly Hill without a shot. At dawn, as villagers emerged from their homes, they found laborers stacking bastions to fortify a new Afghan police post. And something else, which many residents of Juz Ghoray had never seen before: an Afghan flag raised on a wooden pole.

For the government, the new post represents a palpable extension of its reach, a triumph however modest.

But not one without some cost.

"Lee Identified A Second Bomb, And While Readjusting He Stepped On A Third. The Blast Shattered His Right Leg"

Before the Afghans could claim Ugly Hill, two marines had to sweep it for mines. Joshua Lee, a 26-year-old sergeant from Arkansas, located the first I.E.D. using a metal detector. As he set to work on the device, Lee identified a second bomb, and while readjusting he stepped on a third. The blast shattered his right leg, cocking it sideways below the knee and leaving mangled pieces of foot hanging loosely from flesh and bone.

In the morning, while searching a compound at the base of Ugly Hill, the marines discovered three more fully assembled I.E.D.'s, containing 100 pounds of explosives. When technicians set charges around the bombs, detonating them in place, a six-foot crater was left where one of the compound's buildings had stood. The following evening Echo Company continued south, making camp on a plateau of hard-packed gravel; as the desert night grew frigid, a small convoy arrived to resupply the men with food and water.

Turning to climb the steep escarpment, the lead vehicle hit yet another bomb. Its mine-roller — an extended axle of weighted wheels that tests the ground ahead — absorbed the brunt of the blast. Walking nearby, a young platoon sergeant, Jacob Maxwell, was knocked off his feet as rocks and wreckage from the obliterated roller struck his legs and back. This was Maxwell's fifth deployment. During a single tour in Iraq in 2006, he survived four I.E.D. explosions.

When the dust settled, he was sitting beside the road, cut and bruised, but otherwise unscathed. The corpsman who treated him judged his luck to border on the freakish. Nonetheless, after the attack, Maxwell assured me he'd be leading his platoon on its coming operations. Those will take the company even deeper into Taliban country, to farther-flung villages than Juz Ghoray, among Afghans who, more than 10 years after the government's creation, still lack any meaningful contact with it. "The Marines are going out into the hinterlands," Maj. Frank Diorio, the battalion's executive officer, told me.

"They're not tied to any posts. It'll be ongoing until we leave. It's just going to be continuous operations."

The Marines didn't arrive in force in Helmand until 2009.

There, in places like Kajaki and Sangin and Musa Qala, after 10 years and 821 coalition deaths and thousands of wounded, the insurgency perseveres.

Year after year, month after month, Helmand has ranked as the deadliest, most violent province in Afghanistan. Nowhere else comes close.

Growing anxiety over the Pakistani border regions, however, means that America's withdrawal from the country will most likely happen more rapidly in Helmand than in the eastern provinces.

During the coming year, the number of marines there will shrink by the thousands; as early as this summer, many Marine positions will be shuttered or handed over to the Afghan Army and the police.

No one expects the insurgency to be defeated by then.

[Here Comes The Lying Bullshit From Command That Nobody, But Nobody, Really Believes]

The issue has long ceased to be how we can decisively expunge the Taliban — we can't. Instead, the question is: How can we forestall its full-fledged resurgence upon our departure?

Toward the end of this year's fighting season, just before the winter rains, I spent seven weeks with marines across much of Helmand, and everywhere the answer was basically the same.

First, leave behind a proficient national security force. And second, win them as much breathing room as time allows.

The Marines' push into Juz Ghoray was part of this plan.

Adhering to a provincewide blueprint for withdrawal, Echo Company had recently closed two of its patrol bases, which in turn permitted longer-range operations, previously impossible, like the taking of Ugly Hill.

"Essentially, we're trying to consolidate American forces and turn over positions to the Afghans in order to facilitate deeper operations," Lt. Nikolaos de Maria, the platoon's commander, told me shortly after the I.E.D. attacks that injured Lee and Maxwell.

[Right. Like giving up Stalingrad to the Russian army was a part of a plan "to facilitate deeper operations" by the German army. T]

"So the center will be the Afghan Police. The next wave, around that center, will be the Afghan Army. And then for us, we're trying to operate a lot deeper. So that would be a third concentric ring. We would be on the outside, ready for a harder fight." **[This must look just so peachy-keen special on power point! Meanwhile, a leaked report from NATO command last week documents wholesale desertions by Afghan police and Army to the Taliban. T]**

[OK; The Introduction Is Over: Here's The War]

Later that afternoon, a local man claimed that insurgents had buried three I.E.D.'s in the dry riverbed crossed by the marines on their way to Juz Ghoray.

After they found and detonated one of the bombs, several marines stayed to watch the area during the night. In the morning they were attacked by machine guns and artillery clattering from unseen positions to the east.

Hearing the exchange back at Ugly Hill, de Maria rallied the rest of his platoon and the Afghan Army soldiers. As they donned their flak jackets and shouldered their radios and loaded their carbines, the men were charged by the usual electricity — but there was something else too: relief at the promise of actually confronting whoever had been trying so hard to blow them up. **[Relief? Really? See the reporters' later comments on**

how it feels to go marching off through ground full of buried IEDs. Stark terror would be a bit closer to reality. T]

“We’re bringing the hammer,” de Maria said over the radio.

Cpl. Brandon Sisson led the platoon down the hill and through the deserted village. Thin and scrappy, with a penchant for brawling, Sisson should have been a sergeant, but in Iraq his promotion stalled after he broke another marine’s jaw so badly he needed to be evacuated to a hospital in Germany. Now, at 23, with a wife and a child and another on the way, Sisson claimed to have mellowed with age. When we emerged into farmland, more shots rang out and the marines found cover where they could.

As we lay flat on our stomachs in the wet mire of a tilled poppy field, Sisson shook his head. “I liked Iraq a lot better,” he said. “You could actually see them.”

[How The Quaint, Childish Afghans Have “No Discipline]

Just then two Afghan soldiers strutted by holding their weapons like folded umbrellas. They seemed entirely unconcerned by the fact that people were shooting at us.

I recognized one of them. In lieu of a rifle, he humped a rucksack full of rocket-propelled grenades. The marines loved him for this and had nicknamed him R.P.G. Others were less popular: because they were lazy, because they complained, because they smelled, because they stole, because way too often they were way too stoned — the list of grievances ran long. In the end, though, what mattered most was that one item never made the list: cowardice. They delighted in fighting. **[Here the reporter is warming up for some really lame crap, to be found in the next paragraph, but for now just this intro about the quaint, childish natives. T]**

If you had to name the principal difference between Afghan soldiers and United States marines, it might best be summarized as “discipline.”

Marines are existentially defined by it; Afghans have little concept of it.

[And there it is. As you read below about the combat tactics of the Taliban, it will be quite clear that the Afghans who have “little concept of discipline” are the ones affiliated with the U.S. troops.

[But the reporter can’t admit that. Oh no. So, the reporter says Afghans in general have “little concept of discipline.”

[Forty years ago you could read exactly the same kind of stupidity from Vietnam. As they deserted the U.S.-created local government by the tens of thousands, or simply looted the peasants, stealing everything that wasn’t nailed down, this behavior by the U.S.-allied Vietnamese troops was explained by saying that Vietnamese in general also had “little concept of discipline.”

[This lack of discipline no doubt explains why Saigon is now known as Ho Chi Minh City, and the American war on Vietnam ended in complete defeat. T]

The previous day, I accompanied a patrol through Juz Ghoray with an Afghan Army squad that insisted on searching the first compound we came to. Sgt. Adam Sweet, the marine overseeing the patrol, was surprised. It was early, we had a long way to go and nothing about the place appeared especially suspicious. "This one?" he asked the Afghan squad leader.

"Yes, this one," the Afghan said. "We must search this one now."

Sweet had become a marine by accident. After being arrested for driving while stoned, he dropped out of college during his first semester, was evicted from his apartment and soon found himself back in Nebraska, living with his mom.

There he met a girl who invited him to go with her back to Fort Collins, Colo., where she attended school. Sweet went. Six months later the girl pledged a sorority and announced she was moving in with her new sisters. "I didn't know what to do," Sweet told me. "So I ended up getting drunk one night and told myself that I should join the Air Force. I showed up in the morning to join the Air Force, and they were closed. So I walked next door to the Marine recruiting office and signed the paperwork." A year and a half later, Sweet was carrying a machine gun through the streets of Fallujah.

In Juz Ghoray, he shrugged and followed the Afghan soldiers into the compound. No one was home.

As Sweet scrupulously searched room after room — opening ornate chests, shaking out heavy blankets, rifling through piles of hay, sniffing plastic fuel jugs — I noticed one of the Afghans hurry across the courtyard with a large propane tank.

Then another ran by carrying a metal cooking pot. Finally came a third, making a basket of his shirt that bulged with fresh eggs. A few minutes later, Sweet and I found the whole squad huddled in the livestock pen. A shaggy-haired soldier sporting a Che-style beret grinned at us a little sheepishly.

"Breakfast?" he said.

Now, as bullets clapped toward us in the muddy poppy field, R.P.G. gave a thumbs up.

"Taliban good!" he said.

Corporal Sisson returned the gesture. "Hopefully, Taliban dead."

An Undisciplined Boy "Crossed The Stream; He Scaled The Embankment; He Passed Right Through The Ranks Of Frantically Yelling Soldiers. All The While He Held Up His Scarf As If It Were A Flag"

We pushed past a cornfield toward another village farther east. Whole families were running away. Sisson noticed, on a distant ridge, the silhouette of a lone figure and the glint of something metal catch the sun.

“We got a spotter,” he told de Maria.

Bullets kicked the dirt near several of the marines, and the platoon pressed through the village to a wide, white-rocked creek on its other side. This was as far as they were authorized to go.

From the edge of an eroding embankment that dropped precipitously, the marines watched a train of people fleeing toward the eastern hills. The figure on the ridge vanished, and soon two men on motorcycles appeared among the villagers.

“They’re screening themselves with the women and kids,” Sisson said. As the marines struggled to find a clear line of sight on the men with motorcycles, someone peeled away from the exodus and began walking toward us.

It was a young boy, maybe 9 or 10, and he trailed a voluminous black scarf held high above his head. The cloth flapped in the hot wind.

Sisson spat. “They’re doing this on purpose.”

The boy walked all the way to the creek, where he seemed to waver, regarding the marines and the Afghan soldiers shouting at him to stop, turn around, get out of the way.

Then he kept coming. He crossed the stream; he scaled the embankment; he passed right through the ranks of frantically yelling soldiers. All the while he held up his scarf as if it were a flag.

The men on motorcycles came and went: now picking people up, now dropping others off — tauntingly, or so it felt. Soon the sun began to dim. It made of the men vague shapes receding deeper into a country where they knew the marines could not follow.

When I looked around for the boy, he was gone, too.

The men on motorcycles and the train of villagers fled in the direction of Kajaki, a small district on the Helmand River connected to Musa Qala via a Taliban-controlled road riddled with karez (ancient underground aqueducts, which insurgents sometimes use to transport people and equipment).

“That’s The Wild West Up There. We Won’t Ever Go Up There”

Over the years, Kajaki has been reduced to a ghost town. From the tops of the mountains that form its spacious valley, the village looks like a kind of postapocalyptic tableau: uncultivated fields and the ruins of razed homes; abandoned roads pocked by blasts from I.E.D.’s; the uprooted stumps of bulldozed trees; the ransacked, shuttered stalls of what used to be a large bazaar; and roving packs of jackals that fill the empty nights with a mournful howling.

But even as the people have absconded, the fight in Kajaki has raged on. It has raged on because the fight has never really been about the people.

It has been about the dam.

The Kajaki Dam, made of terraced earth rising more than 300 feet, blocks a narrow ravine in the upper Helmand River to form a massive lake whose bays and fingers reach deep into sheer-walled coulees. Controlled outflow from the lake provides electricity for much of southern Afghanistan and irrigates more than half a million acres of farmland. It has the potential to do much more.

"It's only operating at really 30 percent," Cpt. Matt Ritchie, commanding officer of the last Marine battery in charge of the area, told me. Hundreds of tons of concrete are needed to install an additional turbine that will bring the power output nearer to capacity.

Although a major road links Kajaki to Camp Leatherneck, the provincial headquarters for the Marines, until recently it was far too dangerous to transport the material. "Because of the dam," Ritchie explained, "Kajaki is significant. But this is the one district that's cut off. We didn't have any connection to any other districts within 20 kilometers."

Last October, the Marines commenced what might prove to have been their last major offensive in Afghanistan, with the aim of ending Kajaki's isolation.

While an infantry battalion breached the district from the south, two platoons from Ritchie's battery were inserted by helicopters into its northern woodland, long held by the Taliban. "We put a fence in the dirt, literally," one platoon commander told me. "Put concertina wire down and said, 'You're not going to get north of this area.'" Between the two fronts of marines, the officer said, "during the three to four days that we were there, I think we killed about 30 of them. They quit picking up their casualties." The sole escape for the insurgents was to ford the Helmand River and disappear into Zamindawar, an ungoverned desert extending from the dam to the foothills of a towering mountain range several miles north.

"And they did exactly that," the platoon commander said. "That's the Wild West up there. We won't ever go up there."

When I arrived in Kajaki in early November, a few families had begun trickling back to the villages below the dam, returning for the first time after six years to find out whether their homes might still be standing. By then, Captain Ritchie was finishing up his seven-month deployment and a new unit had just arrived to begin theirs.

Now that the road from Camp Leatherneck was secure, the incoming marines were focused on "developing the Afghan National Security Forces and getting them to own the battle space, to protect the dam," the new commander said.

In fact, there is a good chance the marines in Kajaki will be gone altogether by this summer.

If that happens, the Afghan police officers and soldiers who are left behind will quite likely face a tough fight as the insurgents living in Zamindawar move to exploit their increased vulnerability. **[Tough fight? In your dreams. They'll simply leave, very quickly. T]**

“When I Asked Whether The Outgoing Marines Offered Him Any Advice About The Route He Planned To Take Today, Windisch Replied, ‘Yeah: ‘You’re Gonna Get Shot At’”

Of the several posts the Afghans will inherit, the least tenable will be one called the Shrine, the only Marine position north of the Helmand River, perched atop a small hill, on the frontier of the Wild West.



Sgt. Erick Granados (right) and Marines heading toward an outpost known as the Shrine. Joël van Houdt for The New York Times

About a half-dozen Afghan policemen shared the Shrine with a squad of marines, who rotated in and out. Perhaps because of the forced intimacy of the tiny outpost and the shared experience of coming under constant attack, the marines and Afghans stationed there enjoyed an uncommonly functional, even fraternal, relationship. They knew one another’s names, shared responsibilities, laughed and joked and sometimes ate together.

All of the police officers on the Shrine were Tajiks or Uzbeks from northern Afghanistan who said they enlisted and came to the Pashtun south because they believed in their country and its government; they were nationalists. **[Hopefully the reader has a barf bag close at hand for that one. T]**

Their commander was a gaunt middle-aged Uzbek named Ghulam Jalani. Over several meals of rice and lamb in the cramped hut where his men quarter, Jalani expressed deep admiration for the Marines. He also fears for the day they go home.

“I am not an educated man,” Jalani told me one night. “In fact, I am illiterate. But I tell you: if the Marines leave here, the Taliban will come back.”

The following morning, a squad from the new unit showed up for its first week at the Shrine. The squad leader, 25-year-old Erick Granados, is a first-generation American whose parents immigrated to the United States from El Salvador. Built like a wrestler and covered in tattoos, he is also the shortest man in the platoon. Even by Marine standards, Granados is deeply, almost fanatically, patriotic. One of the things he brought with him to Afghanistan was a large American flag.

Upon arriving at the Shrine, while his squad was still unpacking, Granados climbed onto a bunker roof and planted the flag between two sandbags. It was a surprisingly potent image — something you rarely see in Afghanistan, where the U.S. deliberately fights the stigma of an occupying force by framing its activities as strictly ancillary to the national government.

I would learn that marines from the previous battery also had a flag. Invariably, they said, whenever it went up, the Shrine came under attack.

This time, the insurgents waited until dark, firing on the outpost with automatic weapons a little before midnight.

Jalani and the other Afghan police officers sprinted to their machine guns in sandals and T-shirts, spraying bullets haphazardly into the dark.

Using thermal optics, Granados was able to locate two men as they descended into a narrow canyon that snakes through an area called Chinah in the Taliban-occupied country north of the Shrine. After calling in illumination rounds that burned slow trails through the night, radiating pools of incandescence across the black expanse, the marines concentrated several volleys on the canyon. Staff Sgt. Vincent Bell seized the opportunity to observe a policeman firing a PK machine gun.

Bell had deployed four times to Iraq, but this was his first tour in Afghanistan. As the policeman, pausing now and then to ash the cigarette that hung loosely from his mouth, showered a fusillade of bullets in the general vicinity of the canyon, Bell cried out: "You boys are raw! I mean raw, raw, raw!" The Afghan gave him a quizzical look, as if uncertain whether he was being chastised. "Don't get me wrong," Bell told him. "I like it!"

Eventually, the gunshots petered out. But a couple of hours later, a marine noticed two men digging with shovels near the road that connects the Shrine to the main base at the dam. He alerted Sergeant Granados, who magnified their images using a remote-controlled camera mounted atop a tower that relays infrared video to a monitor at its base. After watching the men excavate a hole, place an object inside and bury it, Granados radioed his superiors and requested permission to shoot them. The permission was denied. "They want to see components," Granados complained. "They want to see wires, jugs. We saw something getting put into the ground. To them, that isn't good enough." The marines watched the men toss a handful of branches over their project, then flee quickly back to Chinah.

Intermittent gun battles continued until dawn, when the sun bloomed from behind a series of serrated ridgelines, and the whole wasted valley — the cattails that crowd the river's banks, the yellow pastures where ragged camels graze, the wind-bent corn against the western desert — emerged in bright relief.

I was drinking tea with Jalani when two trucks, loaded with farmworkers heading out to harvest the last of the year's crop, came bumping down the road leading to the outpost. As they reached the place where the two men were seen digging in the night, a tremendous explosion echoed off the hills and the trucks vanished in a geyser of erupted earth. Thirteen passengers, including women and children, had been crammed into the trucks, but somehow none were killed or badly hurt. A few minutes later, carrying satchels and tools, the Afghans continued toward their fields on foot.

"Where are they going?" I asked Jalani.

"To work," he said.

That afternoon, another squad from Granados's platoon, led by Sgt. Samuel Windisch, conducted its first foot patrol in Kajaki, north and west from the Shrine, into an area called the brown zone, where lawless Zamindawar **[translation of "lawless": the Taliban government rules, and their version of "lawlessness" lacks thieving, chicken stealing Uzbek and Tajik occupation troops. T]** abuts the territory controlled by the Marines.

The purpose of the patrol, Windisch told me, was "to test the enemy's forward line of engagement. We're looking for a fight, basically." I

n 2005, Windisch was shot by a sniper in Fallujah. The bullet caught the upper right corner of his chest plate, knocking him down with a force that he said felt like someone hitting him with a sledgehammer. He re-enlisted nonetheless, and two years later he did another tour in the same city.

When I asked whether the outgoing marines offered him any advice about the route he planned to take today, Windisch replied, "Yeah: 'You're gonna get shot at.' "

Following behind Joshua Gray, a young lance corporal who swept the path for I.E.D.'s, Windisch and his squad headed for Devon Hill, a steep knoll jutting from the western desert.

Passing through the coalition-friendly village of Kanzi, we came to a dirt road where Gray noticed something that made him stop.

Extending across the road — almost like a border — several neatly stacked stones had been arranged in a perfect line. The bomb-sniffing dog was sent forward to investigate; when it detected no explosives, the marines pressed on.

Later, Windisch would wonder whether the stones marked what he called "the flip, literally the line in the sand," delineating the place where insurgents still prevailed.

After rounding the northern slope of Devon Hill, the marines glimpsed for the first time what lay on the other side: mud-mortar homes crowding the edge of a meandering gulch, women hanging laundry out to dry, children chasing one another over rooftops, men reaping fields of wheat with scythes — entire communities, not a quarter-mile from the Shrine, cut off from the Afghan government, untouched by its laws, its army and police.

Soon Gray halted the patrol once more.

This time he spotted the barely visible edge of what appeared to be a piece of hand-carved wood poking out among some rocks. A corporal with a long-handled sickle joined Gray at the front and lightly scored the earth around it. The ground there was rough and the sickle blade accidentally bumped the object loose.

What came up was a carefully constructed apparatus consisting of a cylinder and a sharpened dowel: a nonmetallic pressure switch. If depressed, the wooden spike would have struck a highly combustible powder that would have activated a detonation cord, triggering a main charge — a plastic fuel jug packed with homemade explosive — buried deeper underground.

After recovering the first one, Gray spotted a second, identical wooden switch barely protruding a few feet away.

While Windisch and his executive officer, First Lt. Terence Sawick, reported Gray's find to headquarters and plotted their next move, the squad's Afghan interpreter, a soft-spoken and frail-framed young man, whom I'll call Mukhtar (he doesn't want it known among Afghans that he works with Americans), nervously surveyed the village.

Mukhtar had been working with the Marines in Kajaki ever since they succeeded the British. His English was impeccable, the best of any linguist I've encountered in Afghanistan. (He told me he perfected the language by listening to the speeches of Barack Obama.)

For more than two years, Mukhtar had been away from his family in Kabul. He earned \$865 a month, but what kept him in Kajaki was the hope of someday earning a visa to enter the United States.

“This Is A Bad Place To Stop.” “A Barrage Of Gunfire Converged On Us”

Now, with unsettling emphasis, he turned to me and whispered, “This is a bad place to stop.” Before I could ask why, Windisch called out to his squad, “We're going home.”

And as Gray turned east, cutting across the broad face of Devon Hill, a barrage of gunfire converged on us.

It came from several directions, multiple compounds, some close and others far. Bullets zipped past, making the high-pitched cartoon sound of buttons popping off a fat man's coat, the singing of taut wire. Some smacked the ground around our feet, raising small puffs of dust and cracking into rocks.

“Get down! Get down!”

“Where's it coming from?”

A sharp declivity separated the rear of the patrol from those farther up the hill. Cpl. Michael Subu, the assistant squad leader (recently promoted to sergeant), yelled at the marines pinned below to bound for higher ground. "Get up here now!"

The bullets continued in bursts, snapping overhead; each enemy position had at least one machine gun. Spotting muzzle flashes, the marines sited their rifles on "murder holes," narrow gaps in compound walls designed to accommodate barrels aimed from the inside out.

Someone spotted four men with AK-47's rushing through a house less than 50 yards away. Subu delivered a rapid series of rounds through its windows as his team moved uphill behind him. Unable to lay his heavy weapon on the downward grade, Joshua Donald, the squad's 22-year-old machine-gunner, brought it to his hip and directed a steady stream of automatic fire toward another compound farther north. Windisch and Sawick radioed headquarters, asking for artillery support. But the squad was situated in between the targets and the mountains from which the howitzers and mortars would be fired.

If ordnance fell short, it could land on the marines.

"We gotta move!" Subu called.

Gray stood up and began quickly sweeping a path with the metal-detector down the east side of the hill. The marines followed as closely as they could while kneeling, reloading and returning fire to the north.

As the slope leveled off into short, tilled terraces, a new sound joined the melee: heavy weaponry clattering from somewhere high above us.

"What is that?"

"It's the Shrine!"

From up on the outpost, about a quarter-mile away, Granados radioed Windisch and asked him to mark a target. Windisch aimed his rifle-mounted grenade-launcher at one of the compounds where he'd seen consistent muzzle flashes. The grenade slammed into the compound wall, blowing open its metal door. A moment later, the marines on the Shrine unleashed a rain of ammunition.

Not far from the bottom of the terraces stood a low, mud-mortared wall. But to get there, we had to cross an open field in full view of the gunmen.

Over the field, bullets audibly split the air. Gray popped two canisters of smoke and tossed them in the dirt. As the yellow clouds poured out, meeting in a thick, obscuring pall, the squad sprinted for the wall. Crouching behind it, Subu recognized more insurgents shooting from a tree line a couple hundred meters off. Windisch shouldered a rocket launcher, and we ducked and plugged our ears as its blast threw debris against us. The rocket soared long, exploding just beyond the trees.

"We're moving!" Sawick yelled. "Keep moving!"

One last stretch of exposed terrain remained, a shallow wadi we had crossed to get to Devon Hill.

When Sawick, Windisch and Subu stepped into the streambed, a burst from a machine gun nearly took them out . Bullets skipped off the stones around them, ricocheting past their heads.

By now, the marines on the Shrine had intercepted enemy radio communications: two insurgents were moving heavy guns to flank us from behind.

“Keep going!” Sawick urged.

The enemy fire followed us all the way to Kanzi, despite incessant pounding from the Shrine. When we finally reached the village, a group of farmers were standing outside, surrounded by children. The men cheered and gave thumbs-up to the marines, while the children ran to them, pleading for chocolate.

Sawick had Mukhtar tell the eldest of the men to lead us the rest of the way. The farmer was understandably reluctant. Sawick insisted, and the marines fell in behind him as he guided us through the fields, turning unexpectedly, zigzagging this way and that, following some unmarked route he knew by heart.

At the base of the Shrine, the marines lighted cigarettes and congratulated one another. Except for Staff Sergeant Bell, Sergeant Windisch and Corporal Subu, it was the squad's first taste of combat.

As a 22-year-old in Kunar Province, Subu was awarded the Navy and Marine Corps Medal for heroism during the winter of 2008, after he jumped into a freezing river, while suffering from hypothermia, to rescue his drowning squad leader. While the younger marines now laughed and joked, giddy with adrenaline, Subu turned to Windisch and shook his head. “That was close,” he said. With a little bit of wonder, as though unsure what to make of it, Windisch told him, “It's been six years since I fired my rifle at somebody.”

I looked around for Mukhtar and found him standing by himself, apart from the others. He removed his helmet and spread his bandanna on the ground, then got to his knees. As more gunshots came from the north, and the marines on the Shrine answered in kind, Mukhtar bowed and muttered, praying toward an orange sun setting over Devon Hill.

That night was unusually quiet in Kajaki. According to village scuttlebutt, five Taliban had been killed. “I think we gave them enough hell for a while,” Windisch predicted. But the next evening several Afghan policemen found a fight on the riverbank, and in the morning Granados raised his flag again. In fact, he climbed onto the bunker roof and waved it at the northern desert before planting it in place. I was eating breakfast with one of the younger marines, who laughed and said, “It's about to get crackin'!”

Fifteen minutes later, an 82-millimeter mortar round whistled over our heads and slammed into the hillside, unearthing a small crater not far from the half-sunken pipe that the squad urinated into.

“After The Ambush On Devon Hill, The Marines Suspended Further Patrols Into The North”

After the ambush on Devon Hill, the marines suspended further patrols into the north.

“There’s no tactical advantage to going up there other than getting in a firefight,” one officer told me.

“We can spend another 10 years in Afghanistan and still be fighting like that. We have to look at the bigger picture, which is turning all of this over to the Afghans.”

My last night on the outpost, I had dinner with Ghulam Jalani. “We need the Marines to stay here,” he told me again. “We might not be able to defend this area.” Indeed, it’s hard to imagine a half-dozen Afghans holding onto the Shrine without the camera tower, the thermal optics, the high-powered binoculars, the heavy machine guns, the illumination rounds, the sniper rifles and the nearby mortars and howitzers that the Marines need to defend it now.

It’s also hard to imagine that, deprived of these assets, Jalani and his men would not choose to return north, where their wives and children wait for them, instead of risking their lives for a Pashtun population that doesn’t speak their language.

After dinner, one of the policemen loitered near my cot, watching me pack my bag. He seemed to be working up the nerve to speak. Finally, I asked him what he wanted. He explained that the days were getting cold now, and he had no socks.

“Unique To The Fear Of I.E.D.’S Is A Sense Of Powerlessness. For Marines, This Fear, Above Every Other, Rates The Most Acute”

A week and a half later, Staff Sgt. Vincent Bell stepped on an I.E.D. and was killed.

When I heard about Bell, I was shocked to learn that he was 28 — my age. I assumed he was much older. He enlisted after high school, a few months before 9/11, and participated in the invasion of Iraq. He did four tours in the worst of that place. With Bell, as with so many marines, war had accelerated his maturation in ways both physical and psychic.

On patrol he was exceedingly apprehensive about I.E.D.’s. You had the sense he had seen too much not to be — that is, he knew that apprehensive was the only prudent state of mind. I walked behind him twice, and he was by far the most cautious of any marine I followed.

He took no chances. He did everything he was supposed to do.

In a combat zone, each of a variety of threats instills its own corresponding fear.

Unique to the fear of I.E.D.’s is a sense of powerlessness.

For marines, this fear, above every other, rates the most acute.

Forgoing tactical formations, they often walk in single file behind engineers with metal detectors. They overturn suspicious rocks with hooks affixed to bamboo stalks. They mark every turn with lines of shaving cream or baby powder in the dirt.

They travel over rooftops, laying ladders across alleys to cross from house to house. After dark they leave a trail of chemically treated Q-tips that glow under night-vision goggles.

And they study every step they take for signs of tampered ground.

But despite these precautions, there remains a limit to the degree of safety that vigilance affords, and ultimately it is chance that kills or spares you.

This fear — the fear of chance and your helplessness to affect it — is a constant companion to the grunts conducting daily foot patrols across the bomb-littered country of northern Helmand.

Nowhere has the I.E.D. been put to deadlier and more ubiquitous use than in Sangin, a central transit hub on the Helmand River just south of Kajaki. Home to the province's second-largest bazaar, an entrenched drug economy and a connecting route to Kandahar and Pakistan, Sangin has inspired the Taliban's fiercest resistance throughout the war.

“It Was Vietnam,” A Former Platoon Commander Told Me. “Every Day We Were Fighting For Our Lives.”

Between 2006 and 2010, the British lost 106 soldiers there. When the Marines took over, with larger numbers, they aggressively took the fight to the enemy, pushing hard into areas the Brits had shunned.

“It was Vietnam,” a former platoon commander told me. “Every day we were fighting for our lives.” The next Marine unit deployed to Sangin lost 25 men, with more than 200 wounded: the heaviest toll by far of any American battalion since the beginning of the war.

Today the fight in Sangin has changed; knowing they will always lose, the insurgents who remain seldom ambush the marines, or engage them with small arms.

Rather, they rely almost entirely on I.E.D.'s — and at this they have grown terribly adept.

Most of the bombs in Sangin are fashioned from materials with a low-enough metallic signature to go unnoticed by hand-held detectors. Plastic jugs filled with potassium chlorate, a few nine-volt batteries offset from the charge, old speaker wire connecting to a pressure plate of wood and copper, anti-tamper devices made with clothespins, brake lights or hypodermic needles and improvised blasting caps — this is all you need.

In October, the same unit that replaced the British in 2010, the Third Battalion, Seventh Marines, returned to Sangin for another tour. I visited them toward the end of November, and already four marines had been killed by I.E.D.'s, with another 17 severely injured, 10 of them amputees.

The prevalence of hidden explosives, the daily fact of them, has engendered in the war-weary residents of Sangin a kind of defiant apathy.

My first day in the district, I arrived at a small base shortly after a squad of marines had left on a routine patrol. About 600 meters outside the wire a young boy stopped them to point out the location of a nearby I.E.D.

I was in a tent with the platoon commander, who found the squad on the remote-controlled camera and zoomed in on the boy. He looked about 12. "He wants to bring it to us," the squad leader radioed back to the lieutenant.

"No," the lieutenant told him. "Do not do that."

But the boy had already bounded off, retrieved something from the tall grass and was carrying it back to the marines. "It's just the pressure plate," the squad leader said over the radio. And then: "Correction. He has the whole I.E.D."

The marines yelled: "Put it down! Put it down!" Eventually the boy tossed the device — a jug, plate, wires — roughly to the ground. He seemed to do it with a shrug. The lieutenant shook his head and told me this had happened several times before.

**"Both Of His Legs Were Amputated Above The Knees. He Glared At Us With Naked Loathing. He Cursed Us In English As We Passed.
"They Feel Like If We Weren't Here, Bombs Wouldn't Be In The Ground"**

A few days later, I accompanied a patrol with another squad, led by First Lt. Matt Perry, during which we were invited into a compound by a young man caked from head to toe with splattered mud. The man, Kareem Dada, was building additional walls for his home, which he'd recently inherited from his father.

Nearby, as he and Perry spoke, Kareem's 9-year-old brother leaned on a pair of old crutches, shifting his weight from armpit to armpit, adjusting the burden on his single leg. Three months ago, the boy and two other brothers had triggered an I.E.D. while playing in an alley near their house. The blast killed one boy and badly maimed the two survivors, who were taken to Camp Leatherneck for surgery.

On their way to see them, racing along the Helmand River, Kareem's parents crashed their car and died.

"Who do you blame?" Perry wanted to know.

"The Taliban," Kareem answered automatically. "I hate them. Look at what they did to us."

As the marines left the compound, they found the third brother, who was maybe 13, waiting outside in a wheelchair.

Both of his legs were amputated above the knees. He glared at us with naked loathing.

He cursed us in English as we passed.

Back at the base, I asked Perry why he thought the third brother's attitude toward the marines had been so different from Kareem's.

The lieutenant held up his hands.

Maybe they weren't who they said they were. Maybe Kareem's whole story was a fabrication and they'd been involved in placing an I.E.D. that accidentally detonated. This felt plausible, if disturbing.

But then Perry offered another explanation, which seemed to suggest a paradox inherent to any counterinsurgency: "They feel like if we weren't here, bombs wouldn't be in the ground."

"No Insurgents, Only Traces Of Them Everywhere"

When the Americans replaced the British, there were only a few patrol bases outside of the battalion headquarters, and each was perilously embattled. Since then the Marines have established dozens of positions throughout Sangin and driven the Taliban from the district center.

This, however, has not completely prevented insurgents from carrying out attacks.

"The bottom line with the enemy we're facing is that he's in civilian clothes, he's riding a motorcycle and he's unarmed," Lt. Col. Seth Folsom, the Marines' battalion commander, told me.

"The way he operates is through the use of caches. He'll move from one cache to another, get the materials he needs and emplace I.E.D.'s that way. . . . They know we're not going to just start mowing down guys on motorcycles. So even though we cast a wide net, a lot of fish still get through."

Most of the caches are believed to be scattered through desert regions beyond the district center, particularly to the east, near the border of Kandahar. From there, components are smuggled piecemeal — a jug one day, a pressure switch the next — and only later assembled in Sangin proper.

"If you know how to put one together," Folsom explained, "it literally takes minutes, if not seconds. If we catch them in the act, we can drop ordnance on them. But if they get away, we'll track them out to the east until we eventually lose sight of them." Until recently, the Marines, distributed among their many fixed positions, lacked the manpower to go after these caches and disrupt insurgents infiltrating from the east. But as in Musa Qala and elsewhere, they have now begun handing over posts to the

Afghans, freeing up personnel for operations “in the hinterlands.” While I was in Sangin, the first Marine patrol base was formally transitioned to the Afghan National Army. Later that week, also for the first time, an entire company moved east — and kept on going all the way to Kandahar.

For four days they hiked the desert, sweltering in the afternoon and bitter cold at night, sleeping in villages, searching each house and hole they crossed.

They had anticipated opposition, but they found instead a conspicuous, almost eerie, absence of military-age men.

“It’s like when you turn on the lights, the cockroaches all disappear,” Folsom said one afternoon. “When you turn off the lights, they all come right back out.”

No insurgents, only traces of them everywhere.

One day, searching a compound far from any village, the marines discovered four jugs of explosives, rolls of white speaker wire, casings from U.S. illumination rounds (scavenged for employment as projectiles) and several radio transmitters used as remote detonators.

The last were especially worrisome. The battalion had yet to encounter remotely detonated I.E.D.’s in Sangin. “What this indicates to me is that if they’re not using remote-control devices in our sector, they will be soon,” Folsom said — and they have in fact encountered them since I left.

Two days later, on a sandy ledge, one of the technicians registered something with his metal detector. A sergeant probed around the ground with his knife and exhumed a bulky object wrapped in tire rubber. Cutting through the rubber and the patterned cloth beneath it, the sergeant unveiled a Russian-made machine gun; as he assembled its parts, another marine, farther up the bank, called out, “I got something else here.” It was an AK-47 buried just below the surface.

A couple of minutes later, several loaded magazines were found. Then a burlap sack containing 130 pounds of ammonium nitrate. Then a plastic bag with 17 pounds of a mixture of aluminum nitrate and ammonium powder. Then some pressure plates. Then two-way radios used as triggering devices. Then carbon rods, detonation cord, blasting caps and speaker wire.

Very close to the caches stood a compound. The day before, the marines asked the owner if they could spend the night inside his walls. The owner, who struck some as suspiciously hostile, refused. By the time the caches were discovered, he was gone.

Before I left Sangin, I attended a memorial service for two marines who were killed a week earlier by an I.E.D. The centerpiece of any memorial for a marine is the formal construction of his battle cross. The rifle stuck bayonet down, the helmet set atop the butt stock, the dog tags draped on the pistol grip, the boots placed on the ground. The end result is a movingly personlike assemblage of the dead man’s essential gear. What holds it all together is the rifle.

Clearly, the rifle is meant to symbolize a kind of linchpin — the singularly vital thing. Yet somehow, it is the boots, their laces neatly looped and tied, that are most affecting. It is the boots, not the rifle, that most evoke an absence. It is the boots that young marines reach out to touch when they kneel before it all.

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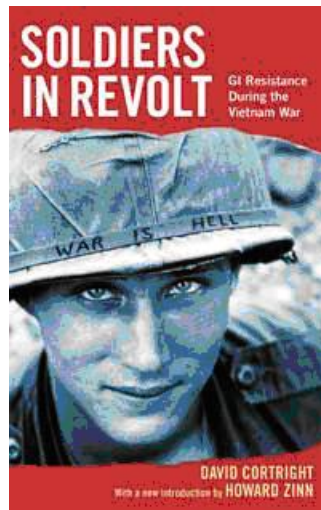
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