

To the Kurt Schork Awards Committee:

I am writing to nominate Matthieu Aikins' story, 'The A-Team Killings,' which appeared in the November 21, 2013 issue of *Rolling Stone* and uncovered evidence for some of the gravest war crimes perpetrated by American forces since 2001. Pursued independently over the course of five months in some of Afghanistan's most dangerous terrain, Aikins' extraordinary and courageous reporting comes at a time of waning independent journalism on America's longest-running war, and revived public calls for accountability for the killings.

In early 2013, allegations emerged in Afghanistan that a twelve-man US Army Special Forces unit—known as an A-Team—had, along with their Afghan translators, engaged in a campaign of extrajudicial killing and enforced disappearances in a remote district of Wardak Province. As a result of a public outcry, Afghan President Hamid Karzai forced the A-Team to leave the area; not long afterward, human remains were discovered buried outside their base, remains that the locals said belonged to men who had been arrested by the Americans. Yet, despite the efforts of news outlets like the *New York Times* and Reuters, which covered the protests, the allegations remained vague and unproven. The area where the incidents had occurred was extremely dangerous to access, and no foreign reporters visited. The US military categorically denied any wrongdoing by the A-Team and suggested insurgent propaganda was responsible for the allegations, and by this summer, the story had quietly slipped from the media.

Working independently as a twenty-nine-year-old freelancer on behalf of *Rolling Stone*, Aikins, at great personal risk, traveled over a period of five months beginning in June of last year to volatile Wardak Province and, eventually, to the remote district where the events had taken place, in order to interview dozens of eyewitnesses, victims, family members, and local officials. On one occasion the Taliban ambushed an Afghan Army convoy with which he was traveling, while on another he and his translator were showered in glass by a nearby car bomb. Gradually, Aikins established a detailed and meticulously cross-referenced body of testimony and documentary evidence that proved the A-Team's responsibility for the arrest of the missing men who were later found outside the base, as well as other incidents of extrajudicial killing and torture carried out by the unit's translators in their presence. He gained access to confidential reports by the UN, the Red Cross, and the Afghan government that corroborated his findings and, in a reportorial coup, managed to visit Zakaria Kandahari, one of the A-Team's translators, in Afghanistan's notorious Pul-e Charkhi prison. Kandahari accused his American employers of the killings, and provided details that allowed Aikins to identify the unit and individuals involved. Aikins then obtained photos of the individuals and, mixing them with random images of American Special Forces soldiers obtained from the Internet, constructed a photo array similar to the kind used by police. He returned to Wardak Province, where victims were able to pick out members of the A-Team from the grid, and identify individuals that they alleged had been present during executions and abusive interrogations.

Aikins' innovative and intrepid techniques brought clarity to a subject that had been shrouded by the fog of war. The result is an investigative masterwork that illuminates in an unprecedented manner the extreme violence of Afghanistan's war-torn rural areas, giving voice to the war's most voiceless victims—the illiterate and impoverished provincial farmers—while shedding light on the war's darkest corner: the activities of US special forces in the country's inaccessible hinterlands, typically off-limits to all but the briefest and most stage-managed embeds. The story's stark palette of cruelties illuminate the moral ambiguities at the heart of a war where, in the words of one US official, "sometimes our adversaries are the men and women of a community." In its depiction of the murky world of special operations, where abusive interrogations are commonplace, and Afghan translators—routinely armed in contravention of US military regulations—wield the power of life and death over their captives, the story provides a frightening vision of the future of the country, as conventional military forces depart and the unresolved conflict becomes the province of the CIA, the Joint Special Operations Command, and their Afghan proxies.

While, after being presented with evidence of war crimes by the UN and the Red Cross, the US Army quietly opened a criminal investigation into the incident, Aikins showed that none of the investigators had ever visited Wardak or had spoken to any of the witnesses and officials that he interviewed. As a result of the publication of this article, groups such as Human Rights Watch, Amnesty International, and the UN's Special Rapporteur on Extrajudicial Executions, have publicly called for a thorough and impartial investigation into the killings. An unauthorized Pashto translation of the article appeared in the Afghan media, and the issue of special forces operations and civilian killings became a central sticking point in Karzai's refusal to sign a Bilateral Status Agreement with the US. In December, Zakaria Kandahari was sentenced to 20 years in prison by an Afghan court for his role in the killings; in the meantime, the US Army's investigation remains ongoing.

I believe that Aikins' courage in reporting this story exemplifies the fearless pursuit of truth that this award was established to recognize. Over the past five years of his freelance career in Afghanistan, Aikins has become known for his skill and

daring in disguising himself as a local—due to his ethnic features and acquired proficiency in Dari—in order to pursue stories unavailable to embedded journalists. He has crossed the border with Pakistan on two occasions, in the company of drug smugglers and truck drivers. The physical courage required on his multiple trips to Wardak Province, which made his reporting breakthrough possible, is evident. However, I believe Aikins also deserves recognition for his moral courage in directly accusing an elite US military unit of war crimes, in a country where un-embedded and independent reporting is expensive, time-consuming, and dangerous. Aikins' willingness to take physical and professional risks in order to bring justice to powerless Afghan civilian victims demonstrates an adherence to the highest ethical traditions in journalism.

Sincerely,

Sean Woods
Deputy Managing Editor
Rolling Stone

The A-Team Killings

Last spring, the remains of 10 missing Afghan villagers were dug up outside a U.S. Special Forces base - was it a war crime or just another episode in a very dirty war?

By Matthieu Aikins | November 6th, 2013

In the fall of 2012, a team of American Special Forces arrived in Nerkh, a district of Wardak province, Afghanistan, which lies just west of Kabul and straddles a vital highway. The members installed themselves in the spacious quarters of Combat Outpost Nerkh, which overlooked the farming valley and had been vacated by more than 100 soldiers belonging to the regular infantry. They were U.S. Army Green Berets, trained to wage unconventional warfare, and their arrival was typical of what was happening all over Afghanistan; the big Army units, installed during the surge, were leaving, and in their place came small groups of quiet, bearded Americans, the elite operators who would stay behind to hunt the enemy and stiffen the resolve of government forces long after America's 13-year war in Afghanistan officially comes to an end.

But six months after its arrival, the team would be forced out of Nerkh by the Afghan government, amid allegations of torture and murder against the local populace. If true, these accusations would amount to some of the gravest war crimes perpetrated by American forces since 2001. By February 2013, the locals claimed 10 civilians had been taken by U.S. Special Forces and had subsequently disappeared, while another eight had been killed by the team during their operations.

Officials at the American-led International Security Assistance Force, or ISAF, categorically denied these allegations, which came at an extremely delicate moment - as Afghan President Hamid Karzai and the American government were locked in still-unresolved negotiations over the future of American forces in Afghanistan. The sticking point has been the U.S.'s demand for continued legal immunity for its troops, which Karzai is reluctant to grant. Privately, some American officials have begun to grumble about a "zero option" - where, as in Iraq, the U.S. would rather withdraw all its forces than subject them to local law - but both sides understand that such an action could be suicidal for the beleaguered Afghan government and devastating for American power in the region. Yet a story like the one brewing in Nerkh has the potential to sabotage negotiations.

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Last winter, tensions peaked and President Karzai ordered an investigation into the allegations. Then on February 16th, a student named Nasratullah was found under a bridge with his throat slit, two days, his family claimed, after he had been picked up by the Green Berets. Mass demonstrations erupted in Wardak, and Karzai demanded that the American Special Forces team leave, and by April, it did. That's when the locals started finding bodies buried outside the American base in Nerkh, bodies they said belonged to the 10 missing men. In July, the Afghan government announced that it had arrested Zikria Kandahari, a translator who had been working for the American team, in connection with the murders, and that in turn Kandahari had fingered members of the Special Forces for the crimes. But the American military stuck to its denials. "After thorough investigation, there was no credible evidence to substantiate misconduct by ISAF or U.S. forces," Col. Jane Crichton told The Wall Street Journal in July.

But over the past five months, Rolling Stone has interviewed more than two dozen eyewitnesses and victims' families who've provided consistent and detailed allegations of the involvement of American forces in the disappearance of the 10 men, and has talked to Afghan and Western officials who were familiar with confidential Afghan-government, U.N. and Red Cross investigations that found the allegations credible. In July, a U.N. report on civilian casualties in Afghanistan warned: "The reported disappearances, arbitrary killings and torture - if proven to have been committed under the auspices of a party to the armed conflict - may amount to war crimes."

Last year, on the morning of November 10th, a slight, meek-faced, 38-year-old farmer - let's call him Omar - with a fan-shaped beard and heavily callused hands, was standing with his neighbor, a 28-year-

old shopkeeper and father of three named Gul Rahim, when they heard a bomb blast followed by gunfire. The two had been trying to dig out a tree stump in front of Omar's house, which looked out onto the village of Polad Khan, adjacent to the main road between the provincial capital of Maidan Shahr and Nerkh's district center.

Nerkh, despite its orchards of apple trees and clean Himalayan air, is not an easy place to live. Like much of Afghanistan's rural population, the residents of the district, impoverished tenant farmers, are trapped between the inexorable pressures of the insurgency and the American military. The militants, who have deep roots among the local population, will kill anyone who cooperates with the foreigners. Even being seen talking to the Americans is a risk. When the Taliban come to their houses at night, demanding food and shelter or the services of their sons, refusal can mean death. And yet the presence of those militants might draw a drone strike or a raid from the Americans. It is an impossible but daily dilemma. A slip can be fatal.

That November day, a roadside bomb had hit the American Special Forces team as it patrolled nearby, lightly injuring an American soldier and a translator. Soon afterward, a convoy of Americans mounted on ATVs, followed by Afghan soldiers, came rumbling down the road. Fearful, Omar and Gul Rahim put down their tools and went inside. As they sat in the back room, surrounded by Omar's young children, a burly, bearded American burst through the front door, accompanied by two Afghan translators who started searching the rooms. They found the two men and yelled at them to get up; when Omar protested, one of the translators, Hamza, started kicking him, and his blows sent Omar crashing through his window into the garden.

As Omar lay stunned on the ground, his wife and kids rushed over, hysterical, and clutched at him to protect him, but Hamza fired several shots over their heads, killing a cow and scattering the woman and children. He then dragged Omar into a small, walled apple orchard, where the other translator - a tall, sunken-eyed man who had taken the nom de guerre Zikria Kandahari, after his southern birthplace - was beating Gul Rahim in front of several Americans. In the neighbor's orchard, Americans had found the trigger wire for the bomb that had exploded earlier in the day. As the two pleaded their innocence, one of the Americans came over and shoved Omar up against the wall, punching him. Omar says he watched as Kandahari marched Gul Rahim about a dozen yards away, and as the Americans looked on, the translator raised his pistol to the back of Gul Rahim's head and fired three shots. When Kandahari turned and strode toward Omar, pointing his pistol at him, Omar fainted. When he came to minutes later, he was being dragged into a Humvee.

Omar was the only civilian eyewitness to Gul Rahim's killing, but in Wardak I spoke to three of his neighbors who said they had seen the American Special Forces arrive on their ATVs at Omar's house, had heard gunshots and, after the soldiers had left, had seen Gul Rahim's bullet-riddled body lying among the apple trees, his skull shattered. The Americans later returned and demolished the orchard's walls with explosives; when Kandahari saw the 12-year-old son of the orchard's gardener, he taunted the boy: "Did you pick up his brains?"

Fearing that Omar too had been killed, his family searched for his body to no avail. But Omar's ordeal was just beginning. He trembles as he recalls to me what happened next. He was taken to the U.S. base in Nerkh and put in a plywood cell, where he was left until the next morning. Then the interrogations began. He says his hands were bound above his head and he was suspended and then beaten by Kandahari and the bearded American. There were two Americans and their translators interrogating him, and they asked him about Gul Rahim, and about well-known insurgent commanders in the area; Omar professed to know nothing. He says the beatings intensified, and he fainted several times - they twisted his testicles, he admits shamefacedly. The interrogation sessions continued for two days. Bound to a chair and beaten, Omar was certain he would die. At night, shackled in his plywood cell, he would recite verses from the Koran and think of his children. At one point, Kandahari held a pistol to Omar's head and told him that he would kill him as easily as he had killed his friend.

Meanwhile, once Omar's fellow villagers realized that the Americans had arrested him, they sent a delegation of elders to the police chief and the provincial governor to plead for Omar's release. Both

said they were powerless, but by chance an American military officer was visiting the police headquarters. The elders told the officer how Gul Rahim had been executed and Omar detained. They said the American seemed surprised but skeptical and told them that he would look into the matter. (A spokeswoman for ISAF says that allegations of wrongdoing were first raised to U.S. military officials in November 2012 and reported up the chain of command.)

That same evening, the Americans handed Omar over to the Afghan army soldiers who had a camp next door. Omar suddenly realized he was being set free. "I promised that I would kill you," he says Kandahari told him, "and I don't know how you're getting away alive."

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"There is no security in Maidan Shahr," mutters Mohammad Hazrat Janan, the deputy head of Wardak's provincial council, as he gazes through the shattered windowpanes of his office. A short, brusque politician who has grown wealthy during the Karzai regime, Janan is dismayed at the way the province seemed to be spiraling out of control. Wardak is a crucial battleground in the war, a strategic area that both the U.S.-backed government and the insurgency have been committed to winning. An hour earlier, a massive car bomb had hit the Afghan intelligence compound nearby, knocking me and my translator to the floor while we were interviewing Omar and showering us with broken glass. "You see those hills about one kilometer away?" Janan says, pointing up the valley in the direction of Nerkh. "We can't even go to those villages."

Maidan Shahr is only 30 minutes west of Kabul, but it seems to inhabit an alternate universe from the capital, where traffic-clogged streets are lined with fast-food stands and shops selling counterfeit designer goods. Suicide bombings, like the one that had just blown out the windows, are common here in Wardak, as are Taliban ambushes on the main highway, which passes through the province on the way to the south of the country and is littered with bomb craters and burned-out tanker trucks.

Many of the men who disappeared in Nerkh were rounded up by the Americans in broad daylight, in front of dozens of witnesses. One of the relatives I speak to, a wry, almond-eyed construction foreman named Neamatullah, tells me of a raid on November 20th, 2012, in his village of Amarkhel. Around dawn, he and his four brothers and their families woke up to the sounds of motorcycles and ATVs in their village. The bearded Americans broke down their front gate and entered with a dog. They yanked the men outside while they searched the house, and then took them down to a collection point in the village, where they were rounding up the men of Amarkhel. They ferried about 40 people to the Nerkh district center, where they sat for most of the day. Eventually, the Americans scanned the retinas and fingerprints of the men, and swabbed their hands for explosives residue, and then, in front of local police and government officials, selected eight men to take to their base. Neamatullah says three of his younger brothers, Hekmatullah, Sediqullah and Esmatullah, were among them.

The men were kept for two nights, one of which they spent in a suffocating shipping container, before most of them were released, including Hekmatullah, who says Kandahari and an American soldier had selected who would be set free. When Hekmatullah, a 16-year-old student, finally came home, his family was overjoyed and hoped that Esmatullah and Sediqullah would soon be released too. They never saw them again. The Special Forces refused to let the villagers approach the base; the provincial government and the Afghan police and army said the matter was out of their hands. Neamatullah and the relatives of the other missing men visited the Red Cross, which communicates with wartime detainees on behalf of their families, but he said they were unable to find the men in the main prison near Bagram or any other detention facility in the country. It was as if the men had vanished.

A similar roundup occurred on December 6th in the nearby village of Deh Afghanan, after which another four men who were taken to the American base went missing. By the time the Green Berets left Nerkh at the end of March, a total of 10 men had disappeared. Another eight were allegedly killed by the A-Team out on patrol. For example, on November 27th, four days after a truck bomb concealed under a load of firewood struck the provincial government headquarters in Maidan Shahr, locals say a driver who delivered firewood named Aziz Rehman was stopped by the Americans. After the Special Forces left,

they found Rehman lying next to a stream, badly beaten. He died of his injuries on the way to a hospital in Kabul.

“They did this to terrorize the people, because they could not defeat the insurgents,” Janan, the provincial official, says, as his staff begins sweeping up broken glass and debris from the truck bombing. “These people were not Taliban, but even if they were, no one is allowed to just kill them in this way.”

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Nerkh district is not an easy place to get to. It’s only a few miles along paved tarmac from the provincial capital, but the thick apple orchards and mud-walled compounds that line the road offer cover for the insurgents, who plant bombs and snatch passengers from their cars. The only way for me, my driver and my translator to get there is to attach ourselves to an Afghan army convoy heading to the district center. The soldiers are terrified of roadside bombs, and their line of Humvees inches forward as they sweep the ground ahead on foot. Halfway there, we are ambushed by machine-gun fire and rocket-propelled grenades coming from nearby compounds. As the Afghan soldiers fire back wildly with their .50-caliber machine guns and RPGs, we leave our unarmored Corolla and lie flat in a ditch next to the road. After the convoy gets moving again, the Afghan soldiers continue firing aimlessly into the villages and fields that we pass. Later, when we find out that a boy and several cows have been killed in the crossfire, the Afghan officers shrug. In a place like Nerkh, the shooting of a child is unremarkable for everyone but the family.

The district center, which lies on the north shoulder of the valley and commands a sweeping view of the fields and orchards below, has a besieged feel to it; the government and police officials that live in the compound rarely venture out into the villages. Across the road from the district center is Combat Outpost Nerkh. During the surge in 2009, a company of infantry pushed out from Maidan Shahr and reclaimed the valley for the Afghan government. For several years, rotations of American infantry have come and gone from Nerkh, patiently practicing the techniques of counterinsurgency doctrine, each time holding shura meetings with the locals, where they would explain how they were here to bring the benefits of development and stability.

Those years have accomplished very little. Nerkh has been a hotbed of guerrilla resistance since the war against the Soviets in the 1980s, when two mujahedeen groups, Harakat-e Islami and Hizb-e Islami, had held sway in the area. By the late Nineties, the Harakatis had mostly joined the Taliban, whereas Hizb-e Islami had stayed independent. They sometimes fought each other, but mostly they cooperated in an attempt to drive out the foreigners and the Karzai government. Yet Nerkh couldn’t simply be abandoned. With its proximity to Kabul, the district became an important staging ground for suicide attacks on the capital. According to a senior Afghan official, during a recent Taliban attack in Kabul, militants had spoken on cellphones with handlers based in Nerkh.

That was the volatile terrain that the 12-man unit of U.S. Army Special Forces encountered when it arrived in COP Nerkh in the fall. These units are known as Operational Detachment Alpha, ODA, or A-Team. The one in Nerkh, ODA 3124, was based in Fort Bragg, North Carolina, and had deployed with ISAF in 2012. They are part of the “white” Special Forces, which are supposed to wage a counterinsurgency in support of the Afghan government by holding key terrain and building up local militias, as opposed to the “black” Special Forces of the Joint Special Operations Command that launch night raids and work on covert, cross-border operations with the CIA. Not that the Green Berets didn’t hunt the bad guys. The 1st Battalion would face heavy fighting in Wardak; by the end of the deployment, five Green Berets would be killed in the province.

The rural areas in Nerkh are largely controlled by the insurgents; for the A-Team, every trip into the villages meant the chance of death or injury in an ambush or a roadside blast. “They’re venomously anti-American there. It’s just always been that way,” one U.S. military official tells me. “Sometimes our adversaries are the men and women of a community.”

Nor did the team trust the local government officials and police, who had their own murky ties in the area. They were especially suspicious of the Afghan Local Police commander, a bulky jawed man named Hajji Turakai, who has the heavy paunch and mitts of a retired prizefighter. The ALP is a militia program started by the Americans that aims to recruit local armed groups; Turakai had been a Hizb-e Islami commander during the Soviet war, but had thrown in his lot with the Americans once they arrived in the district. He maintained a little militia force that hung on to a section of Nerkh, probably by cutting deals with his erstwhile insurgents' comrades. That's how the war works.

It was actually a previous group of Special Forces operating out of Maidan Shahr that had first set up Turakai and his ALP unit, but the new A-Team wanted nothing to do with him. "They said I was cooperating with the enemy," Turakai tells me at the district center. During the December 6th raid in Deh Afghanan, the A-Team arrested Turakai's nephew. When Turakai met with the Special Forces to plead his nephew's innocence, he says that the A-Team's officer, a young captain named Timothy Egan, became enraged and said Turakai's nephew had admitted that his uncle was supplying weapons to the militants. In a scene witnessed by several Afghan policemen, Egan put a pistol to Turakai's head. "The Americans wanted to take him away, but when they saw me, they let him go," one Nerkh police officer tells me.

After that, Turakai left the district, not returning until after the A-Team was forced out at the end of March. The missing men's families, acting on a tip, got permission to dig inside the base for bodies but didn't find anything. Then, about a week later, a shepherd, who had moved his flock onto the previously untouchable grounds just outside the American base, came to Turakai and said that he had seen a feral dog digging at human remains. A group of relatives and local officials arrived and found several bone fragments, including the lower portion of a human jaw, along with distinctive clothing that led them to believe they were the remains of Mohammad Qasim, a 39-year-old farmer who was the first person to disappear after being arrested by the Special Forces in his home village of Karimdad on November 6th, 2012.

Over the next two months, human remains were found in six different sites on the flat, barren grounds around the base. The first relatively intact corpse was uncovered in an irrigation ditch, dug up by farmers who went to clear it out. Identified by his clothing as Sayed Mohammad, he was in a heavy-duty black body bag, resembling the kind used by the U.S. military. ("We had absolutely nothing to do with that man's death," Col. Thomas Collins, a U.S. military spokesman, said at the time.) Other remains had been scavenged by the wild dogs that inhabit the area. Some showed traces of burning, along with what appeared to be the remnants of body bags. The closest site was about 50 yards from the base, and all were within sight of the guard towers.

When I ask the Afghan army commander who had taken over COP Nerkh after the Green Berets' exit if there was any way that someone could bury a body 50 yards outside his perimeter without him being aware of it, he laughs. "There is no possibility," he says, pointing out that his guard towers have clear lines of sight in all directions over the flat ground. No one could start digging outside the base without attracting immediate attention. "The Americans must have known they were there."

When I show photos of the remains to Stefan Schmitt, director of the International Forensic Program at Physicians for Human Rights, who has extensive experience examining mass graves in Afghanistan, he says that Sayed Mohammad's corpse, given its relatively intact condition, is consistent with its having been buried at the start of the cold winter season.

Neamatullah was part of the group of relatives and officials that would go and examine the grisly finds and try to identify the remains according to the clothing and other personal artifacts found with them. Jihadyar, a civil servant whose brother Mohammad Hassan was arrested by the Americans, recognized his brother by the matching watches he had bought. The most damaged remains were taken to the government forensic medicine center in Kabul, but lacking DNA testing capabilities, they could only ascertain that they were human. Nevertheless, by June 4th, the families had found 10 sets of remains that they believed matched the 10 missing persons. At the second-to-last site, Neamatullah says he recognized the clothes his brothers were wearing; he wept as their bodies came out of the ground.

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In July, a few months after the A-Team had left Nerkh, the Afghan government announced that it had arrested the team's translator, Zikria Kandahari. Officials had a video of Kandahari beating Sayed Mohammad in custody and accused him of murder. They also said that he professed his innocence, and that he blamed members of the A-Team for the killings. But Kandahari hadn't spoken to the media until after his August transfer to Pul-e Charkhi, the main prison in Kabul, and I decided to pay him a visit. Pul-e Charkhi was the scene of horrific massacres by the communists at the end of the 1970s, and its reputation has never really recovered. The main building is a wheel of concrete cell blocks in severe Soviet style, but it has since expanded into a sprawling compound of moldering barracks and weedy courtyards, occupied by thousands of inmates, many of them Taliban fighters.

I am led by a prison guard up to Kandahari's cell block. On the other side of a chain-link fence, a line of bored-looking men lean into the wire and watch me with interest. Crowded into cells, the inmates largely regulate themselves. Stabbings and gang violence are common.

The guard brings me into the office of the block supervisor, and I sit down on a sofa, where a steaming cup of green tea and a plate of grapes are put in front of me. After about 15 minutes, a tall, bearded young man with stooped shoulders, clad in a dark shalwar kameez and waistcoat, enters the room and regards me warily.

"Are you Zikria Kandahari?" I ask him. He assents. "You were a translator for the Americans?" I ask. He pauses. "Yeah, man," he replies and clasps my hand.

We sit down on a couch together, and the prison guard soon loses interest in our English conversation. Kandahari has an intense face, enhanced by his gauntness, protruding cheekbones, beetling dark brows and sunken eyes. On his right arm, he has his real name, Zikria Noorzai, tattooed, along with a green sword. On his left, a poem in Pashto, translated as:

*There are no real friends or friendship
It's strange but true
Each one, just until they reach their goal
Will stick with you*

Pul-e Charkhi is a bad place for him to be, he says. There are plenty of people in here that he himself has put behind bars, plenty of Taliban. He taps his right sleeve and lowers his voice. "I made myself a knife by sharpening some metal," he says. "I don't have any friends in here."

His English is rusty at first but soon moves into the fluid argot peculiar to young Afghan men who have become fluent by serving as translators for the American military; it is the locker-room slang of working-class American males, larded with expletives, "bro's" and "man's."

He tells me that his father was killed during the Soviet war, and so it had been up to him to provide for his mother and sister. He grew up in Kandahar, the birthplace of the Taliban and - though he looks older - claims that he first started working for the Americans at the age of 14 in 2003. "It's not your age, brother," he says, bumping his fist against his chest. "It belongs to your heart, how big it is."

Kandahari entered the violent, secretive world of the Americans working at the former Taliban leader Mullah Omar's compound on the outskirts of Kandahar City, where both the CIA and the U.S. Special Forces had set up camps. He says he started as a driver for military intelligence but soon graduated to working as a translator for the Green Beret A-Teams that were part of Task Force 31, nicknamed the "Desert Eagles," which were hunting the Taliban in southern Afghanistan.

Being a translator in a place like Kandahar conveys a distinct isolation; the high salary is coveted, but many feel that such work with the foreign soldiers is tainted. Working with the Special Forces is doubly

so. Interpreters are not supposed to be armed, but the U.S. Special Forces have largely ignored those regulations. "All ODAs arm their 'terps," one former Green Beret tells me. "Once trust is somewhat built, we train them and arm them. We are doing hairy, dangerous jobs. They need to protect themselves." Kandahari carried an assault rifle and a pistol on missions. For about \$1,000 a month, he spent much of the next decade serving alongside America's elite units. He says he took a bullet in the calf and was severely concussed by a grenade during heavy fighting. As many translators do, he took an American name: Jacob.

He first met the guys of ODA 3124 - the A-Team that came to Nerkh - in Forward Operation Base Cobra in a remote area of southern Afghanistan. "It was a very bad place, a lot of fighting, a lot of SF guys were killed or wounded," Kandahari recalls. On deployment in February 2010, the A-Team was responsible for calling in an airstrike on what turned out to be a convoy of civilians, killing 23 people, many of them women and children.

Kandahari, like many Special Forces interpreters, forged close bonds with the Green Berets. "These interpreters start to get this mentality that they're on the team," the former Special Forces soldier tells me.

Kandahari was especially close, he says, to Jeff Batson, one of the senior sergeants on the team, and Michael Woods, a warrant officer. Kandahari would serve a total of three tours with the A-Team. Between deployments, he kept in touch with both men on Facebook. In September 2012, he says that Batson - then ODA 3124's team sergeant - called him and said that if Kandahari was ready to work, he should meet them in Kabul. "He said that we were going to a very bad place," Kandahari recalls. "I said, 'OK, no problem.'

Kandahari showed up, and after a day they went to Nerkh. There were a few familiar faces, such as Batson and Woods, but most of the team was new. At first, the situation was fairly calm. The A-Team tried to build a relationship with the locals in Nerkh by handing out radios and trinkets, but they wanted nothing to do with the Americans. "They're all Hizb-e Islami motherfuckers there," Kandahari says.

Then, in October, the A-Team got called down to help out an operation in the neighboring district of Chak, where U.S. and Afghan special forces were engaged in fierce fighting against the Taliban. Two Green Berets from their battalion had been killed. One day, Kandahari, along with another interpreter named Ibrahim Hanifi and a small patrol led by Batson, encountered a large force of Taliban. They killed several of them - Kandahari says he had brains all over his uniform from dragging their bodies - but more kept coming.

"There were too many Taliban for us to fight, so we had to escape," he says. On the way back, Batson was shot in the leg by a sniper. While under fire, Hanifi got a tourniquet onto Batson, and Kandahari drove him out to the medevac chopper. "I saved his life," Kandahari says. (Hanifi describes a similar version of events; Batson declined to comment for this story.)

Batson's injury must have been a traumatic event for the Green Berets. On an A-Team, leadership is earned through experience and skill, not rank, which means that it is typically the team sergeant - usually a grizzled vet like Batson - who leads the missions. While the highest-ranking member of ODA 3124 was technically the young Captain Egan, it was Batson who was in charge. "He's our dad. He is the oldest and wisest on the team," the former Green Beret says of the role of a team sergeant. "If I watched him get shot - afterward, I would be very upset. I would lose my shit."

Kandahari says that after Batson was wounded and evacuated, the A-Team's methods became much harsher. "After he left, it changed," he says. "We weren't arresting people according to reports anymore, just whether they looked suspicious. We would arrest a whole bunch of people and take them to the district center." He claims that David Kaiser, the A-Team's intel sergeant, started conducting his own interrogations that only he, Egan and an American linguist were allowed to participate in. Kandahari says he only arrested detainees and handed them over to Kaiser. (The alleged incidents didn't begin until November, after Batson was wounded.) When I ask him about Sayed Mohammad, the man he had

been caught on film beating, Kandahari claims he had left him with the Green Berets. Later that night, he says, Hanifi approached him in their tent. "Hey, Jacob, come and take a look at this," Hanifi said. They went to a nearby storage tent. Inside, there was a body bag with a corpse inside. "It's Sayed Mohammad," Kandahari says Hanifi told him. (Hanifi denies ever seeing Sayed Mohammad's body.)

I tell Kandahari that multiple witnesses claim to have seen him participate in abusive interrogations, and that another had seen him execute Gul Rahim, but he flatly denies ever killing anyone. He says that he had left Nerkh soon after Batson was injured, after quarreling with Kaiser. The Americans were trying to frame him for their own crimes, he says. "They knew what was happening," he says. "Of course they knew. If someone does something on the base, everyone sees it. Everyone knows everything that's going on inside the team."

* * *

When I contact the U.S. Special Forces at Fort Bragg, where ODA 3124 is based, they refuse to allow any of the members of the A-Team to be interviewed, citing the fact that there is an ongoing criminal investigation that opened in July. Likewise, none of the team members I tracked down individually is willing to talk to me. However, I manage to find another interpreter, who agrees to speak on the condition that I not identify him - I'll call him Farooq. He says he had worked with the A-Team before in FOB Cobra in Uruzgan too, but had arrived in Nerkh toward the end of the deployment, well after the incidents occurred. Kandahari had left by then, as he was wanted by the Afghan government, but Farooq said that he had spoken with the other translators who had been present, and they blamed Kandahari for the killings.

"Jacob liked to act like a gangster," he says. "He actually enjoyed killing people. He wasn't a normal person." Farooq tells me that Kandahari had killed prisoners before, during the A-Team's deployment in Uruzgan. Once, he says, a local mullah had been arrested by the team, and, after interrogation, they told Kandahari to release him. But instead, Farooq claims, Kandahari walked him out in front of the FOB and shot him in the face. Farooq was nearby and saw Kandahari standing over the body, pistol in hand. "I saw one," he says. "But he told me about the other two." He says Kandahari bragged to him about strangling one man with a rope, and beating another to death with a wooden club.

Farooq says that the A-Team knew that Kandahari was killing prisoners in Uruzgan. He claims to have seen Batson scold Kandahari after he had executed the mullah. "He said, 'Don't do this kind of crazy shit.'" But for the most part, he says, Kandahari was popular with the Green Berets because he was tough and fearless in battle, a reliable ally in Afghanistan's dangerous terrain. Hanifi points out that they had asked for him on every deployment. "Of course they respected him, because they asked him to come back." Farooq says that he had also heard the trouble in Nerkh only started after Batson got shot and left - but that it was Kandahari who was the perpetrator. "Jeff was able to control that stuff," he says. The other translators at the base had told him that Kandahari had done all the killings without the knowledge of the team, after going out on his own and arresting people.

Indeed, that seems to have been the team's story: Kandahari had acted alone. But dozens of witnesses saw members of the A-Team, not just Kandahari, take the victims into custody. Other military officials suggested to me that at least some of the allegations may have been the result of a campaign to discredit the Americans on behalf of the insurgents. "They may not be completely upfront about everything that occurred," one American military official says. "That's their weapon, saying that these guys committed war crimes."

It's difficult to believe that dozens of illiterate Afghan villagers, scattered across Nerkh District, could have maintained an elaborate and consistent set of lies over a period of months. Most of them had also been interviewed by both the U.N. and the Red Cross, which have conducted extensive investigations into the incidents, and, according to officials familiar with the reports, have found the witnesses and their allegations credible. While the Red Cross can't comment publicly on their findings, a U.N. report in July said that it had "documented two incidents of torture, three incidents of killings and 10 incidents of

forced disappearances during the months of November 2012 to February 2013 in the Maidan Shahr and Nerkh districts of Wardak province. Victims and witnesses stated . . . that the perpetrators were U.S. soldiers accompanied by their Afghan interpreters.”

The Afghan government also conducted multiple investigations into the allegations. A senior Afghan official at the ministry of defense, who was privy to the confidential reports of a joint investigation with ISAF in March, says that he had initially been skeptical of the allegations, believing they were a plot cooked up by Hizb-e Islami in order to get rid of the Americans. “The hardest thing on the enemy is the American Special Forces,” the official says. “Whenever they kill a Talib, the insurgents force the people to demonstrate, as if he were an innocent civilian.”

But after hearing from dozens of villagers, this Afghan official was convinced that the allegations were true - and that the crimes couldn't simply be blamed on the translator. “There's no doubt these people were taken by the Americans,” he says. “And there's no possibility that Zikria Kandahari was doing these actions without their knowledge.” (Regarding the joint investigation, ISAF says, “The representatives agreed that there was insufficient evidence to demonstrate the guilt of either coalition or Afghan forces.”)

* * *

After my first conversation with Kandahari, I was able to obtain the names and photographs of most of ODA 3124, largely by cross-referencing information on Facebook. I took head shots of ODA 3124 members and head shots of random, similar-looking American Special Forces soldiers found using Google Images, and constructed a photo array like the kind used by police investigators. I did the same for the various interpreters who had been in Nerkh.

When I showed the photos to the witnesses in Nerkh, they consistently recognized, without prompting, members of ODA 3124 and their interpreters. For example, Neamatullah, who claimed his two brothers were arrested and later found buried outside the base, correctly picked out six members of the A-Team. When I show a group photo to Omar, the man who witnessed Gul Rahim's execution by Kandahari, he identifies three members of the unit that he alleges were present during the murder and his subsequent torture.

When the joint Afghan government and ISAF investigation team visited Nerkh in March, members of the A-Team said that Kandahari had “escaped” on December 14th. Yet locals accuse the Special Forces of serious abuses after that date. I spoke to a man I'll call Matin, who lives in the village of Omarkhel, which lies deep in insurgent-controlled areas of Nerkh Valley. Matin says that around 5 a.m. on January 19th, the American Special Forces rounded up all the male villagers.

After viewing photos, Matin identifies two specific members of ODA 3124, who, along with a masked interpreter, allegedly took him and his son Shafiqullah, 33 years old and also a driver, into a nearby storage room and beat them savagely as they questioned them about bombs that had been found on a road nearby. They told Matin to take them to his house, and as one Green Beret and the interpreter led him out of the storage room, leaving behind “a bearded American” and Matin's son, he heard three gunshots. The soldiers beat him again as they searched his house, until an Afghan army officer intervened on his behalf. “They were going to kill you, but I told them not to, so now go and see your son's body,” Matin recalls him saying. “If I had arrived earlier, I wouldn't have let them kill your son.”

The Americans had found two IEDs nearby, and they took them to the back of Matin's house and detonated them, partially destroying his home. Then they left. Matin says that he found his son in the neighbor's pantry, with one gunshot wound in his head and two in his chest.

* * *

The incidents in Nerkh did not occur in a vacuum. Over the past 10 years - during a period where a young Zikria Kandahari was learning his trade - human rights groups, the U.N. and Congress have

repeatedly documented the recurring abuse of detainees in the custody of the U.S. military, the CIA and their Afghan allies. “The U.S. military has a poor track record of holding its forces- responsible for human rights abuses and war crimes,” says John Sifton, the Asia advocacy director at Human Rights Watch. “There are some cases of detainee deaths 11 years ago that resulted in no punishments.”

Farooq, the interpreter who had previously served with ODA 3124 in Uruzgan, says that he routinely witnessed abusive interrogations during his time with the A-Team, involving physical beatings with fists, feet, cables and the use of devices similar to Tasers. “Of course they beat people, they had to,” he says. “Often, when we knew someone was guilty, they still refused to admit it or give us information, unless we beat them. It’s the intel sergeant’s job.” He says that the Special Forces soldiers were bitter about how detainees would often soon find themselves freed by the corrupt Afghan judicial system. “I don’t blame the team or Jacob for killing people. When they send people to Bagram, President Karzai lets them go.”

The former Green Beret also says that he often witnessed the rough handling of detainees, which only the professionalism of his team’s leadership kept from escalating. He’s concerned about the toll that the brutal pace of deployments has taken on the Special Forces community. The 3rd Special Forces Group, which ODA 3124 was part of, has one of the fastest deployment tempos even for Green Berets. “Too many deployments with too many friends lost,” he says. “And the locals get it every time, especially in Afghanistan.” The numbers back up his point. Over a decade of war in Afghanistan and Iraq has placed an unprecedented strain on U.S. special-operations forces. The 66,000 members of the Special Operations Command comprise three percent of the military, yet they’ve suffered more than 20 percent of American combat deaths this year in Afghanistan.

And yet when the 2014 deadline for transition arrives and, as Obama put it in his State of the Union Address last February, “our war in Afghanistan will be over,” the quiet professionals of the Special Forces and the CIA will remain behind. They will likely operate under much less restrictive rules and oversight than the current U.S. military mission, and if the CIA’s attitude toward working with Afghan allies who violate human rights is any indication, the fight in Afghanistan may get even dirtier.

Rolling Stone reviewed documents and interviewed former and current U.S. and Afghan officials who were familiar with ISAF and the CIA’s joint military operations, which are governed by a program code-named OMEGA. Last year, cooperation broke down over disagreements on how to deal with the problem of torture in Afghan prisons. In late 2011, after U.N. reports documented widespread abuse, ISAF, citing legal obligations, ceased transferring detainees into locations where there was credible evidence of torture. The CIA and its Afghan militias - known as Counter Terrorism Pursuit Teams, or CTPTs - did not. In early 2012, ISAF sought to certify six CTPT-associated facilities as being free of torture in order to resume OMEGA-integrated operations, facilities that included Afghan intelligence prisons in Kandahar and Kabul, where the U.N. and other groups have documented the systematic use of torture. Due to ongoing reports of abuse, ISAF has still not been able to certify those two locations, but joint operations with the CIA under OMEGA have since resumed. (ISAF declined to comment on “operational details.” A CIA spokesman says that it “does not take custody of detainees in Afghanistan, nor does it direct Afghan authorities as to where or how to house their prisoners.”)

If the U.S. and NATO mission in Afghanistan stalls over negotiations and reverts to the “zero option” as it did in Iraq, the future of the country may well be one of covert warfare under the auspices of the CIA. The status of a regular training mission, as well as international funding, remains uncertain due to the ongoing negotiations over the Bilateral Security Agreement, which the U.S. is adamant should grant legal immunity to American forces. Last month, Secretary of State John Kerry traveled to Afghanistan to meet with President Karzai and discuss the issue. Karzai refused to be pinned down and has called for a Loya Jirga - a gathering of notables - to discuss the issue this month. “If the issue of jurisdiction cannot be resolved, then, unfortunately, there cannot be a bilateral security agreement,” Kerry said recently. “And it’s up to the Afghan people, as it should be.”

* * *

Whether it was Kandahari or his American employers who actually pulled the trigger in Nerkh is, in a certain sense, irrelevant. Under the well-established legal principle of command responsibility, military officials who knowingly allow their subordinates to commit war crimes are themselves criminally responsible. “The issue of whether U.S. forces were directly involved in torture, disappearances and homicides, or condoned it, is only a question of legal degree,” says Human Rights Watch’s Sifton.

The key question is: Who else knew? As ISAF acknowledges, American military officials were aware of the allegations in November, at the beginning of the disappearances and killings. Over subsequent months, senior American military officers were presented with the same witnesses and evidence that had convinced their Afghan counterparts, and were briefed on the Red Cross and U.N. investigations. Yet even after the bodies started turning up, U.S. officials continued to deny any responsibility, citing three investigations that “absolve ISAF forces and Special Forces of all wrongdoing.”

Col. Crichton, the ISAF spokeswoman, says it was when the Red Cross provided new information, after its own investigations, that ISAF notified the U.S. Army’s Criminal Investigation Command, which then opened an investigation on July 17th and is ongoing. “The most prudent course, in consideration of that new information, was to turn the matter over to military investigators for an overall review,” Crichton says. And yet none of the witnesses and family members who were interviewed by Rolling Stone during five months of reporting say they have ever been contacted by U.S. military investigators.

Meanwhile, ISAF is eager to wash its hands of Kandahari, claiming that he was an “unpaid interpreter.” “He had previously worked with coalition units as an interpreter, but was not a contract interpreter for coalition forces at the time of the alleged incidents,” Crichton says.

“The SF guys tried to pick him up, but he got wind of it and went on the lam, and we lost contact with him,” an American official said of Kandahari in The New York Times in May. And yet after Kandahari left COP Nerkh, and as the A-Team was pressured to account for the missing men, he kept chatting with Woods and other members of the team over Facebook. On December 20th, Woods wrote on the page of his other interpreter, Hanifi, whose nickname was Danny, “when you coming back?” to which Kandahari wrote back, “he has no answer for that now Woody.” Woods replied, teasing Kandahari about his fugitive status, “Shit, they ain’t looking for Danny.” “Hahahah,” Kandahari wrote.

On April 29th, a month after the A-Team had been forced out of Nerkh by the Afghan government, and several weeks after the first bodies had been unearthed near the base, Woods posted a thank-you note on his Facebook page, naming several interpreters, including Kandahari and Hanifi. “Words can’t describe how fucking proud I am of every single one of you guys!” Woods continued, “We fucked up the bad guys so bad nonstop for 7+ months that they did everything they could to get us out of Wardak Province.” He ends with a reference to the motto of the Desert Eagles: “PRESSURE, PERSUE, AND PUNISH!!!” The same day Kandahari commented: “same back to you and all 3124 Woody. and i did what i had to do for my friends and my old team.” Both Woods and another A-Team member liked Kandahari’s comment.

The following day, Woods posted a photo of himself and Kandahari, standing shoulder to shoulder in COP Nerkh.

This is Matthieu Aikins’ first story for Rolling Stone He lives in Kabul.

Statement

I want to share with you one of my favorite stories that I've written in a long time, one that I think captures the heartbreak and moral ambiguity of the war as best as I have yet been able. Published in the new issue of Mother Jones, it tells the story of Lance Corporal Greg Buckley Jr., and his assassin, a teenager named Aynuddin. Last fall, I traveled through Helmand Province in southern Afghanistan, finding, among other things, Aynuddin's diary, so that he speaks to us in his own words. Reporting both sides of the story required both that I embed with the Marines and that I travel unembedded in Helmand.

There is much inside the story to explain the sudden and bizarre explosion of insider attacks in Afghanistan, where Afghan police and soldiers have suddenly turned their guns on their Western allies, often at the price of their own lives, but what I think is most worthwhile about it is the simple manner in which the tragedy and absurdity of war are laid bare by the juxtaposed grief of loved ones from opposing sides.

Portrait of an Afghan Assassin

No one is sure what made a 17-year-old poetry-writing cop gun down four Marines. But somewhere in his story is the key to whether we'll ever get out of Afghanistan.

By Matthieu Aikins | Mon Oct. 7, 2013 2:00 AM GMT

August 10, 2012, was the 22nd day of Ramadan, the holy month when devout Muslims fast from dawn until dusk. Summer days in southern Afghanistan are long and brutally hot, and the few dozen officers at the Garmsir headquarters of the Afghan National Police were relieved when, as the light slanted low over the Helmand River, the sunset call to prayer finally sounded. After the evening meal, no one paid much attention as Aynuddin, the 17-year-old assistant to the police chief, walked into the station, picked up an AK-47, and headed toward the open-air gym out back.

There were seven Marines in the gym that night, part of a police-training team that lived on the second floor of the dun-colored police station. They liked to use the gym—a makeshift cluster of weights and equipment under camouflage netting in a corner of the yard—after dusk, when the heat had begun to dissipate. Hospital corpsman David Oliver, a buff, blond, 24-year-old medic, was skipping rope in the corner. Two younger Marines, Greg "Buck" Buckley Jr [1], and Richard "Richie" Rivera, were doing dumbbell curls, yelling "Beach Day!" each time they brought the weights to their shoulders.

Members of the close-knit group had fantasized about Beach Day since the unit landed in Garmsir four months earlier. Once they arrived back at their base in Kaneohe Bay, Hawaii [2], this long-awaited day would be dedicated to women, waves, and booze, the things they missed most in dusty Afghanistan. They had planned every moment—where they'd stay, who'd carry the cooler and who the boom box. In just 40 hours they would begin the journey home. That's why 29-year-old Staff Sgt. Scott Dickinson had joined them. He was trying to get in better shape for his wife.

The end of the deployment couldn't come soon enough. Garmsir wasn't exactly the action-packed war zone that they had been hoping for. Southern Helmand was largely peaceful now [3], three years after the 30,000-troop surge [4] ordered by President Obama began in earnest, and none of them had fired a single shot in battle. Mentoring the Garmsir police force was a thankless task that they had come to loathe. It wasn't just that the Afghan police were shockingly ill-trained and corrupt, or that the Marines spent their days teaching them the most rudimentary of tasks, such as using handcuffs or tourniquets. What was really galling was that the police clearly didn't want them there. "The Afghans didn't really give a shit," Oliver recalled. "We're supposed to be helping them, and it's hard for us to understand that these guys really do not want our help."

Lurking behind the resentment was a gnawing concern: that one of the cops might turn on the Marines without warning. So-called green-on-blue (or insider) attacks had been sweeping Afghanistan [5], leaving dozens of Americans dead. Innocent frictions between the two sides in Garmsir—such as arguments over living space—now took on a more menacing tone. The Marines felt like they were walking on eggshells. "I didn't ever feel safe," Oliver said. "It was, 'Be aware, never trust them, always have your weapon on you.'" But that evening he and some of the other Marines had left their pistols on the weight rack. They were almost home free.

Aynuddin stepped into the gym and leveled his rifle.

* * *

The surge of insider attacks came out of nowhere. In 2007 and 2008, there were just six such attacks combined against members of the US-led International Security Assistance Force. The following year there were 8, the next, 15. In 2011, there were 22 attacks that killed 33 ISAF soldiers and wounded 50. In 2012, the number of attacks more than doubled, with 48 incidents that killed 64 soldiers, accounting for 16 percent of all coalition combat deaths that year. "The sudden wave of insider attacks caught NATO

and the Obama administration completely by surprise," says Graeme Smith, a Kabul-based analyst at the International Crisis Group [6]. "It cut against the grain of counterinsurgency theory, because these betrayals happened right at the moment when the internationals were lavishing money and attention on the Afghan forces."

The attacks have had a dramatic psychological and political impact on the international mission in Afghanistan. An attack that killed four soldiers in January 2012 convinced French forces to pull out of Afghanistan [7] by the end of the year. "The French army is not in Afghanistan so that Afghan soldiers can shoot at them," then-President Nicolas Sarkozy said [8].

The perpetrators have come from each of Afghanistan's regions and major ethnic groups, and from every branch of service [9]. They range from lowly recruits to colonels, from teenagers [10] to men in their 60s [11]. Some have been identified as Taliban infiltrators, and many of the surviving attackers have cited their anger at the occupation of their country. But the US military maintains that the majority of attacks have no relationship with the insurgency [12], and are the result of what it calls cultural conflicts—like the February 2012 case of an Afghan soldier who shot two US troops at Bagram Airfield over the accidental burning of Korans by NATO soldiers [13].

The attacks have confounded military leaders. There was no parallel experience in Iraq or Vietnam [14], where the United States also battled powerful insurgencies while simultaneously training local forces. Nor does the cultural hypothesis fully explain why insider attacks exploded in the last two years, after thousands of coalition soldiers have been in Afghanistan for nearly a decade [15] and the bulk of the surge troops were in place by the summer of 2010.

By 2012, the attacks had precipitated a crisis in ISAF's training and transition plan. The Obama administration's withdrawal strategy [16] hinges on training a functioning Afghan army and police force that will fill the void once all US combat troops exit Afghanistan in a little more than a year. The training mission had to go forward for the strategy to have a glimmer of success. But soldiers were dying in alarming numbers at the hands of their Afghan allies. This is what the ISAF command was grappling with in the spring of 2012, when the helicopters carrying Buck and his unit touched down in Garmsir.

* * *

Once upon a time there was a boy who was seventeen. He would always go to school and attend his classes, but at home he would constantly get into fights, and his brothers and his family were very unhappy with him.

One day, he got into an argument with his mother. She would normally curse him, but this time she even said, "I hope you are hit by a cold bullet."

So she wished even death for her own son. This sentence made him very sad. By now it was sunset, and the boy took some money that he had and left the house.

Lashkar Gah, about an hour and a half drive north along the river from Garmsir, is the quiet provincial capital of Helmand [17], where bazaars selling pomegranates and freshly slaughtered chickens bustle for an hour at sunset before plunging into a deep nocturnal calm. I had come here with a question whose answer had eluded both the Marines and the Afghan government after the Garmsir attack that had killed three Marines: Why had Aynuddin committed such a brutal act?

His family wasn't hard to find. They lived down a side street and invited me into their modest, concrete-walled guest room, a common feature of many Afghan homes. I sat down cross-legged with the men of Aynuddin's family, glasses of green tea steaming before us in the brisk winter air. His 27-year-old half brother, Isamuddin, sat across from me and did most of the talking. He was a truck driver, and he had a round face with black eyebrows that pointed upward in the middle like chevrons, giving him an air of constant concern. Beside him was Shamshad, Aynuddin's full brother, 16 years old with pale freckles, clear green eyes, and roughly chapped hands. "He looks exactly like his brother," Isamuddin said, patting

him on the shoulder.

The brothers had grown up during the civil war, a brutal conflict during which many Afghans perished from hunger and lack of medical care. Life was better now, though. Isamuiddin and relatives had a decent business hauling containers to the military bases, and so the younger boys like Aynuiddin and Shamshad had a chance to go to school. "We grew up illiterate and uneducated," Isamuiddin said, tapping his head, "and it's only today that we know about education."

Like many of his peers, Aynuiddin had started school late and had only reached eighth grade by the time he was 17. Still, he was, his brothers said, the brightest and most diligent student in the family, spending hours on his homework and taking private English lessons in the afternoons. Then, in late 2011, a motorcycle wreck left him unconscious in the hospital for several days. He recovered, but after the accident his behavior changed. He was less interested in his studies and got into violent fights with his brothers and mother, throwing punches and smashing dishes. One day, following a particularly heated dispute with his mother, he ran away from home and ended up joining the police.

I asked his brothers why they thought Aynuiddin had turned his gun on the Marines. Was it possible that he had been recruited by the Taliban? They emphatically denied it. "Our family doesn't have any links with the Taliban," Isamuiddin said. He thought perhaps Aynuiddin's head injury and temper had led to the incident. Or maybe the Marines had abused or insulted him somehow. Aynuiddin's mother, who had been listening to our conversation outside the door, began weeping loudly. Shamshad, and then Isamuiddin, teared up as well. "She regrets getting into the argument with him," he said softly.

Aynuiddin was a sensitive type, he explained, always reading and writing. When I asked what he wrote, Isamuiddin told Shamshad to fetch "Aynuiddin's book." The boy returned with a small day planner with a fake leather cover, its first dozen pages covered in tidy Pashto script. It was a story Aynuiddin had written about running away from home. I was astonished. Diary-keeping is an exceedingly rare habit in rural Helmand, and the language is surprisingly articulate for a boy with minimal schooling.

As night fell, the boy went to the park to sleep. Around midnight, a pack of dogs came into the park and surrounded him. He drew his shawl tight and rolled himself inside of it. The dogs came and sniffed at him, but finally the night passed. In the morning, he was hungry, and wondered what to do.

He was tired, thirsty, and hungry. He had run away from home and was now ashamed in front of the entire world. He couldn't even ask for bread, he was too embarrassed. Filled with regret, he asked himself, why did I do this?

* * *

The week before Christmas, Greg Buckley Sr. pulled his moving van onto a New York City street teeming with holiday shoppers. On each of the van's rear windows was a poster with a photo of a young Marine in his tall, white dress hat, a kid with olive skin and soft, handsome features. "Greg Buckley Jr.," the posters read. "21 Years Old From Oceanside, NY. Never Forget."

Buckley got out and fed the meter. He isn't tall, but there's a solidity to his frame, and he stabbed a callused palm at me in a handshake. We walked into a burger joint and sat down at a table with a red-and-white-checkered cloth. There were plastic wreaths on the door, and a techno version of "Jingle Bells" played on the radio. It would be the family's first Christmas without Greg Jr. The boy was out of place among the illiterate police. He sometimes called into radio stations to recite his poems "about loneliness and love."

Buckley has a blunt forehead and deep-set blue eyes; he talks with a Long Island swagger where profanities seem a natural part of speech, especially when he's angry. Buckley feels his son's death could have been avoided [18] if the Marines had taken more precautions and hadn't been living among the police; he says that's why the Marines haven't responded to his repeated requests for a copy of the investigation into Greg Jr.'s death. (According to a spokesman, the Marine Corps gave Buckley a

preliminary report, but it has not received a copy of the full inquiry, which was conducted by Navy investigators.)

Buckley never wanted his oldest son to join the Marines—he hoped he'd someday work for the family appliance delivery business. The family lived in Oceanside [19], a well-off Long Island suburb of two-car garages and wide lawns whose social life revolves around the school, sports field, and shopping mall. Greg Jr. was nine when the September 11 attacks happened, and afterward he started talking about joining the Marines. His father never took it seriously. Then one evening in 2009, during Greg Jr.'s senior year in high school, Buckley came home to find a recruiter sitting in his kitchen. "Your son wants to join the Marine Corps, sir," the sergeant told him.

"Do me a favor, no disrespect, but pick up all your shit and get the fuck out of my house," Buckley replied, furious that the man had come into his home without his permission.

But Greg Jr. wasn't going to be a child for much longer. He turned 18 that summer and, with his father's reluctant blessing, joined the Marines. The deal they struck was that he would stick with some safe and useful trade, serve his country for a few years, and then come home to Oceanside.

After boot camp, Greg Jr.—Buck to his Marine friends—was sent to Kaneohe Bay to work in a warehouse for a supply and logistics unit. It was a shock to have his son so far away, but Buckley's doubts were somewhat assuaged when he flew out to Hawaii to visit his son and found that he was growing into a man, confident and respectful. Then, in early 2012, Greg Jr. informed his dad that he was being deployed to Afghanistan. Buckley was devastated—he thought his son's enlistment contract precluded combat tours—but there was nothing he could do. Buckley assumed Greg Jr. had been ordered to go. The truth was, his son had volunteered when space opened up on a Police Advisor Team, or PAT. His best friend Richie Rivera was going, and Buck didn't want to miss out.

After finishing their training, the PAT arrived in Garmsir in April 2012 for a six-month rotation. They had barely moved in to the police headquarters when a new wave of insider attacks began.

* * *

Understanding why the sudden spike of insider attacks began in 2011—well after the peak of the surge had passed—requires revisiting the compromise made by the Obama administration two years earlier, when it bowed to the requests of American generals [20], including David Petraeus, for more troops to support their ambitious counterinsurgency campaign. The administration's caveat [21] was that the surge forces had to be out by 2011, and that all combat operations had to cease by the end of 2014, with only an undefined training and advisory mission to continue thereafter.

Once the surge troops had beaten back the resurgent Taliban, the second half of the strategy called for ISAF forces to train their Afghan counterparts to take their place, allowing the United States and its allies to pull back from an increasingly costly and unpopular war. Given the timeline, that meant going big quickly—the size of the Afghan security forces would have to more than double in just a few years, increasing from 150,000 at the start of 2009 to 350,000 by the end of 2012 [22]—in a country whose institutions have been destroyed by decades of war, and where the attrition rate was so high that a third of the entire Afghan army had to be replaced every year. At the peak of this recruiting frenzy, the Afghan military and police were signing up 15,000 men per month [23]. Virtually anyone was accepted, no questions asked, and units were often headed by officers who had paid bribes for their positions.

Embedding special-forces trainers with local units has long been a basic part of counterinsurgency doctrine, but this was different. The short time frame and huge ambitions of the Obama administration's strategy called for close-contact "partnering"—not just involving experienced trainers, but other troops as well—on a scale never seen in Iraq or Vietnam. ISAF's motto became "shona be shona" ("shoulder to shoulder" in Dari) [24], and the bulk of ISAF combat troops were ordered [25] to live cheek-by-jowl with Afghan forces, so the local recruits would learn by example. To keep up with the pace of recruitment, ISAF training teams were padded with enlisted men who specialized in maintenance and logistics—

tasking inexperienced Americans with training inexperienced Afghans.

Buck's PAT, for instance, was composed of a hodgepodge of volunteers from different units, thrown together to meet the sudden demand for trainers. Some were military police, but others were supply clerks and forklift drivers. "They were like, 'Hey, who wants to go to Afghanistan?'" said Oliver, the team's medic.

The whole partnering exercise was a combustible recipe for cultural clashes. Beneath the rhetoric of cooperation, the assumption that armed Afghan and American 18-year-olds would benefit from each other's company was wildly optimistic. Among smaller units in areas of heavy fighting, where Afghans and US soldiers relied on each other daily to stay alive, the bonds of combat tended to dissolve these differences, but tensions flared on midsize bases where there was frequent but shallow contact. With vastly different social norms, hygiene habits, and mannerisms, Afghans often found Americans disrespectful and arrogant, while the Americans could be openly contemptuous of their counterparts [12]. "I thought Iraqis were the worst people in the world, and then I came here," one young soldier with the 101st Airborne told me in Kandahar in 2011, expressing a sentiment typical among the troops.

The friction correlated with the rise in green-on-blue violence. In 2009, only 10 percent of Afghan army units were partnered [22], but in early 2012, when insider attacks peaked, that figure was close to 90 percent [22]. (A spokesman for ISAF says it is "not correct to link the two" and that ISAF's partnering strategy "began long before the increase in insider attacks in 2012.")

Buck and his unit worried about their safety almost from the start. Insider attacks were happening all over the country, and the Taliban was stepping up efforts to infiltrate the Afghan army and police. In April 2012, a member of the Afghan Local Police—one of the US-backed militias that proliferated in southern Afghanistan as part of the counterinsurgency strategy—walked into a police station in southern Garmsir wearing a suicide vest and killed 10 Afghan police officers and civilians [26].

In June, while Buck was on guard duty, he asked an Afghan cop for his ID, per standard procedure, and the man refused. They ended up in a shouting match, and when Buck was later ordered by his Marine superiors to apologize, the Afghan policeman refused to shake his hand. Buck was badly rattled by the incident. "He just had this feeling," Oliver recalled.

Back in Oceanside, Greg Sr. noticed his son sounded increasingly worried in their weekly phone calls. "I don't feel safe here at all. I want to come home," Buck told his father during one conversation. "I'm telling you, something's going to happen to me here."

* * *

Then he asked, where is your brother Mohammad? He replied, he is at home. Then the boy became very happy. He will accompany me, he thought, and we'll start studying together. Then he told the younger cousin to go and ask his brother to come, and tell him that I'm waiting here.

Convinced that the answer to Aynuddin's mystery lay in the time he spent as a runaway, I visited the Lashkar Gah Training Center. Its low-slung barracks look out onto a wide gravel lot, where Afghan police recruits and their ISAF trainers were practicing mock Taliban ambushes, each side pointing empty weapons and yelling, "Bang, bang." Mohammad, a cousin of Aynuddin's, was halfway through the two-month police-training course.

"He was a good person and a dear friend," Mohammad said, folding his chunky army boots under himself as we sat down on the gravel. He had the faintest wisp of a mustache, but claimed that he was 19. "He was having problems at home and couldn't live there anymore," he told me. "First, we joined with the local police."

On the day he ran away from home in early 2012, Aynuddin stayed the night in a park. He spent the next day walking 20 miles to Mohammad's house in Marjah, where he convinced his cousin to join him. It's

not uncommon for runaways to end up with the police, who are desperate for recruits. The day after leaving Marjah, the teenagers joined a band of Afghan Local Police militiamen.

At first, it seemed an exciting adventure. They smoked hashish with the older policemen, cruised around in American-supplied pickup trucks, and fired automatic weapons in the nearby desert. Aynuddin was a good shot, Mohammad recalled, strong enough to handle a light machine gun. Once, he even took part in a gunfight with the Taliban.

But the boy's bookishness was out of place among the illiterate police, and he longed to continue his education. At night, he sometimes called into local radio stations to recite poems that he had written. "They were about loneliness and love," Mohammad said, laughing. "What else is there to write about?"

Aynuddin also confided to him that he had been physically abused by Isamuddin and his other older brothers, who treated him like a servant. (Perhaps that, not the traffic accident, was the real reason for his violent temper.) Normally calm and friendly, Aynuddin sometimes grew bizarrely aggressive, particularly after smoking hash. Once, fed up with being ordered to feed a dog that lived outside the Marjah police station, he shot the animal dead with his AK-47.

A couple months after he ran away and joined the Afghan Local Police, Aynuddin's family found him and pressured the militia to send him and his cousin home. Initially, he was calmer with his family, though he wouldn't speak of his experiences with the police and sometimes stared into space, as if recalling troubling memories. One night, as he slept next to Shamshad, Aynuddin awoke and told his younger brother that he had just dreamt that he was a corpse, and that the people standing over him were about to take him to the graveyard. After a few weeks, the anger spells returned, and after another fight with his mother, he left home again.

This time, he headed south alone to Garmsir, where he joined another US-backed police unit for around two months. In early August 2012, Aynuddin arrived at the Garmsir police headquarters with the entourage of the newly appointed police chief, Sarwar Jan, several Afghan cops told me. The Marines had pushed Jan, a distant relative of Aynuddin's, out of at least one previous posting [27] for his alleged corruption and suspected dealings with the Taliban, but he was well connected politically [28]. He was also rumored to be a sexual predator. "Some of the stuff with pedophilia and chai boys [29] made the Marines sick to their stomachs," one Marine officer told me. "His nickname was 'OJ,' because he was such a criminal."

Afghan police at Garmsir told me that Aynuddin was always at Jan's side, fetching tea and anything else the commander required. At night, they said, he slept in Jan's room. (When I tracked him down, Jan, who is serving a one-year house arrest sentence for allowing Aynuddin's attack to happen on his watch, denied having any corrupt dealings or fondness for teenage boys.)

Around the same time that Aynuddin arrived in Garmsir, Buck's unit got word that they would be leaving on August 12, two months ahead of schedule. The countdown started. A week before their departure, Oliver took a video of Buck lying shirtless in his bottom bunk, staring at the plywood above his head where, like a prisoner, he had drawn lines counting off the days they had spent in Garmsir. He placed his finger against them, ticking off the legs of their journey home, via Helmand's Camp Dwyer and the Manas Air Base in Kyrgyzstan. "Seven days...Dwyer," Buck murmured. "Ten days...Manas. Fourteen days...Hawaii! Oh, yeah!" he cried, wriggling in the bunk.

* * *

When Aynuddin stepped into the gym [10], none of the Marines had time to grab their weapons. He fired two short bursts into Dickinson, knocking him flat. Then he swiveled and shot Buck and Richie. There was pandemonium as everyone scrambled to the back of the tent. "Go, go!" the Marine behind Oliver shouted. He squeezed through a narrow opening in the fence and sprinted to the police headquarters with two other Marines who escaped the tent, as more gunshots sounded. They pounded up the stairs, retrieved their rifles, and radioed for a medevac. Oliver grabbed his medical bag and started back down when he

heard a staff sergeant named Cody Rhode [30] yell, "I'm coming up!" Rhode was shot in the arms and legs but had managed to get out. The Marines put tourniquets on him, and then Oliver, carrying his bag, ran back to the gym, his thoughts on Buck and Richie.

Having emptied his magazine, Aynuddin scrambled back out into the yard. From the upper windows of the police station, Marines opened fire, pocking the concrete wall behind him as he dashed up the tan metal steps of a watchtower in the corner of the police compound, looking for a way out.

Asadullah Khanay, a diminutive police sergeant with curly black hair, was sitting inside the watchtower, taking post-prandial tea with his friend Atiqullah, when suddenly they heard gunshots outside. Then Aynuddin burst into the room. He pointed his AK-47 at them. "Will you do jihad with me against the infidels, or will I have to kill you too?" he said.

"Of course we'll help you, let's do it!" Khanay shouted, leaping to his feet and pulling out his pistol. Drawing closer to the wide-eyed teenager, he suddenly seized the barrel of Aynuddin's rifle and flicked the safety on, then yanked out the magazine. Atiqullah came to his aid and together they tore the weapon from Aynuddin's grip. Aynuddin lunged past them, jumping through an open window onto a walkway that ringed the watchtower, just as a handful of armed Marines kicked in the door. Khanay and Atiqullah threw their hands up. Seeing the open window, the Marines ran around the side of the watchtower and tackled Aynuddin. They threw him down, and Khanay offered his scarf to bind Aynuddin's hands behind his back.

"Let me go—don't give me to the foreigners!" Aynuddin screamed as he was pinned down.

"You idiot—you could have gotten all of us killed," Khanay shouted back.

Below in the gym, Oliver found Buck and Dickinson, both lifeless. But Richie Rivera had managed to crawl out into the yard. He was still alive. They got him on a stretcher, and Oliver and the other medics administered CPR. "Richie," he recalled, "died pretty much in my hands."

* * *

"It's like we're conducting an assault," grumbled Major Mike Martin, a burly, ruddy-cheeked officer from South Carolina, as he surveyed the armed Marines beside him, some of them wearing body armor and helmets. Martin commanded the team that had taken over for Buck's unit, and though his men appeared as if they were outfitted for combat, they were merely preparing to visit their Afghan allies.

Three months had passed since Aynuddin's attack, and the Marines were no longer taking any chances. The PAT had cleared out of the police headquarters and now lived elsewhere on the base. Now Martin and his men carried locked-and-loaded weapons when they trained the Afghan police, a task that had become even more difficult as a result of the limited time they spent with the cops.

Martin and his team walked around to the front of the station, where they found a few policemen relaxing on plastic lawn chairs in the mild winter sun. Several Marines climbed up into the watchtower to stand watch while their fellow trainers chatted with the police. "That incident set us back by a lot," Martin said.

As deaths from insider attacks mounted in 2012, ISAF seemed unwilling to abandon partnering, which was central to its entire Afghanization program. Instead, it pushed the Afghans to develop better counterintelligence and vetting procedures. "They couldn't clamp down too hard on recruitment," explains Smith, the International Crisis Group analyst [31], "because high attrition means they need to keep pumping fresh recruits into the ranks."

A few weeks after the attack on Buck and his unit [32] in Garmsir, ISAF finally ordered a series of protective measures—like "guardian angels," soldiers who stand watch whenever Afghans and American forces are together—and a temporary halt to working with Afghan Local Police [33], whose low level of training and local ties made them particularly susceptible to Taliban infiltration. Partnering has also been

drastically curtailed: Only 23 percent of Afghan army units are partnered today [34], and insider attacks have declined this year, with nine reported incidents as of September, the most recent of which killed three Americans.* (ISAF claimed there has been no "long-term decrease in partnering due to insider attacks" and said the Afghan security forces "are now demonstrating their capacity as they take the lead in fighting.")

But the result has been to leave the Afghan strategy half-finished: A vast and unsustainably expensive force has been mobilized and equipped, but it remains poorly disciplined and widely corrupt [35], and overlaps uneasily with a constellation of even worse-trained militia forces. With the majority of foreign forces due to depart Afghanistan in a little more than a year, it's anyone's guess whether the Afghan forces can stand on their own. If they can't, and the security vacuum causes Afghanistan to revert to chaos, insider attacks will have been partly to blame.

"The question you gotta ask is, is there any more juice left to squeeze from the orange?" Martin said. "Is this as good as it's going to get?"

In October 2012, Aynuddin's family traveled to the headquarters of the Red Cross in Kandahar, where, through a video conference link, they were able to speak to Aynuddin, who looked confused and small in his prison garb. Though there were many witnesses to the shooting, he denied being involved. He's being held at Bagram Airfield, where he has been practicing his English with his captors. His fate, like that of the rest of the Afghans held at Bagram, is uncertain. The Karzai government is adamant that the United States transfer custody of all prisoners [36] on Afghan soil prior to the end of 2014. At that point, Aynuddin might face the abuse and torture that is rampant in Afghan prisons [37]—or he might, given his youth, just be released.

It remains unclear why Aynuddin committed his crime. His family and friends believe he was simply a confused, angry boy prone to lashing out. Most of the Marines that I spoke with, however, believed that he was recruited and trained by the Taliban. The fact that the attack occurred only a couple of weeks after he arrived at the headquarters, and that it happened the same day another Afghan police officer attacked and killed three Marines in northern Helmand, has fueled their suspicions. But none of the senior Marines that I spoke with knew for sure about a Taliban link. Indeed, the basic uncertainty surrounding Aynuddin's case shows just how little anyone at ISAF understood about why these attacks happened, or how they could have been prevented.

* * *

That night last August, when Greg Buckley Sr. stood in his kitchen and listened to the grave-faced Marines, his first thought, after a stunned moment when the world seemed to go silent and film over with gray, was that someone was playing a joke on him, and that idea filled him with rage.

"Listen, I'm gonna tell you this now," he said. "If you guys are here fucking with me, not one of you is going to make it out of my house." But he saw the truth on their faces.

There were days of madness after that, not the raving kind but a sort of fugue, as the family was borne up in a sea of relatives and friends who swarmed the house and filled the street outside in the hundreds.

It was on the way to Dover Air Force Base, to watch his son's body come off a plane in a box, that Buckley's anger returned. A onetime boxer, he'd always had a pugilistic streak. As Buckley and his family waited in the hangar, a tall, blond general approached and knelt in front of him. "Mr. Buckley, I just want to give you my condolences."

Buckley stabbed his fingers into the general's medals. "Do me a favor," he said, "and get the fuck up off your knee and get the fuck outta my face. 'Cause you motherfuckers had my son fucking murdered."

As he recounted this story in New York City, the hum of the restaurant grew louder—they were filming some kind of reality show behind the counter, and a celebrity chef was berating a contestant's burger.

Buckley rested his elbows on the checkered tablecloth and pressed his fingers into his temples. "You signed up to join the Marine Corps, and you might die, and I'm cool with that," he said, his voice softening. It's the way it happened that eats at him. Greg Jr. died carrying out a strategy that seems likely to fail, in a war that may never be won, at the hands of a troubled teenager whose motives may never be clear. "I just don't want this kid, my son, to go out like that."

*The number of incidents has been updated since the publication of the original article, which ran under the headline "Friend or Foe?" in our November/December 2013 print issue.

Links:

- [1] <https://www.facebook.com/GregBuckleyJr>
- [2] <http://www.mcbhawaii.marines.mil/UnitHome.aspx>
- [3] <http://latitude.blogs.nytimes.com/2012/12/07/in-helmand-province-southern-afghanistan-the-surge-seems-to-work/?pagewanted=print>
- [4] <http://http://www.nytimes.com/2009/12/01/world/asia/01orders.html>
- [5] <http://icasualties.org/oef/>
- [6] <http://www.crisisgroup.org/>
- [7] http://www.washingtonpost.com/world/europe/france-halts-training-after-afghan-soldier-kills-4-french-troops/2012/01/20/gIQA77sADQ_story.html
- [8] <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2012/jan/21/afghan-soldier-killed-french-taliban>
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- [10] http://articles.washingtonpost.com/2012-08-17/world/35493178_1_afghan-local-police-afghan-security-afghan-officials
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- [17] <http://helmand.gov.af/en/page/5201>
- [18] <http://www.cnn.com/2012/09/16/us/new-york-green-on-blues/index.html>
- [19] <https://maps.google.com/maps?q=oceanside+ny&ie=UTF8&hq=&hnear=Oceanside,+Nassau,+New+York&gl=us&ll=40.649387,-73.668823&spn=0.802284,1.425476&t=m&z=10&vpsrc=6&ei=XIIqUrSfA8aHwgGCooHoAw&pw=2>
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- [23] <http://webcache.googleusercontent.com/search?q=cache:http://online.wsj.com/article/SB10000872396390444812704577605421023660512.html#articleTabs%3Darticle>
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- [25] <http://info.publicintelligence.net/ISAFpartnering.pdf>
- [26] <http://marines.dodlive.mil/2013/01/08/2012-year-in-photos-april/navy-corpsmen-treat-afghan-police-wounded-by-suicide-bomber/>
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- [28] <http://books.google.com/books?id=B00PwCgNBdMC&pg=PA276&dq=sarwar+jan+now+zad+afghanistan&>

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[30] <http://www.hqmc.marines.mil/News/NewsArticleDisplay/tabid/3488/Article/134189/112-marine-awarded-purple-heart-medal.aspx>

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[32] <http://www.stripes.com/isaf-trainers-told-to-get-closer-to-afghan-partners-to-prevent-insider-attacks-1.187236>

[33] <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/asia/2012/09/20129210058203544.html>

[34] http://www.defense.gov/pubs/Section_1230_Report_July_2013.pdf

[35] <http://pri.org/stories/2013-02-25/bbc-documentary-exposes-corruption-and-abuse-afghan-police-force>

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Statement

The article provides a narrative of the bitter close combat carried out by members of the air wing, who suddenly found themselves confronting heavily armed and suicidal opponents within the perimeters of their own compounds, as well as of the critical support of a Marine attack helicopter squadron, who took to the air as the base was being overrun. The many individual acts of bravery that night averted what might have been a far worse catastrophe. In December, two of the story's main characters, Major Robb McDonald and Lieutenant Colonel Christopher Raible, were given the Silver Star and the Bronze Star for Valor, respectively. The latter was awarded posthumously.

I was able to obtain full access from the Marines to Regional Command Southwest and the air station at Yuma and spent months researching the story in both Afghanistan and the United States, and spoke to many of its key participants. The result is a story which, in its human detail, was hitherto unprecedented, and whose accuracy was subsequently validated by the release of documents under the Freedom of Information Act. Two senior Marine generals subsequently resigned over the attack, and the article does not shy away from criticisms of the security flaws that allowed fifteen men to slip inside a base the size of Camp Bastion.

Enemy Inside the Wire: The Untold Story of the Battle of Bastion

One year ago this month, under cover of night, fifteen Taliban, dressed as American soldiers, snuck onto one of the largest air bases in Afghanistan. What followed was a bloody confrontation highlighting a startling security lapse, with hundreds of millions in matériel lost in a matter of hours—the worst day for American airpower since the Tet Offensive. Yet the attack faded from view before anyone could figure out what went wrong. For the first time, Matthieu Aikins relives those heart-pounding moments and offers an extraordinary account of the Battle of Bastion

By Matthieu Aikins

Illustrations by Matthew Woodson

September 2013

It was a suicide mission. None of them had a doubt about that.

They gathered in the Afghan village just outside Camp Bastion's perimeter wire, the fifteen young men who'd been chosen, some of them barely out of their teens. The village wasn't much to look at, a scraggly collection of mud-walled compounds erected on what, until recently, had been empty desert. Then, like an apparition from the sky, the foreigners had come and built a base so vast that its sewage runoff gave life to the barren ground outside the wire. Fields of opium poppy had sprouted within sight of the perimeter fence, their colorful flowers waving in the wind. For months, disguised as farmers, this team had been sending men to crawl inside the outermost lines of barbed wire, testing the foreigners' alertness and responses. Now they had found a weak point, and the mission could begin. There was no moon tonight, and darkness would cover their approach.

Earlier, in preparation, they had donned their stolen U.S. Army uniforms and faced a video camera. Their leader stood in the center with a Koran in one hand and a British assault rifle in the other. It was early morning, still cool enough for breath to form.

"In the name of almighty Allah, who is king of the kings," he said in broken, memorized English. He was a little older than the rest of them, his beard fuller but still short-trimmed, his face calm and confident. "I want to give this message to Obama, crusaders, and other non-Muslims. You have come to Afghanistan to guilt all Muslims under the name of terrorism. It is not terrorism. We are not terrorists."

The Afghan on his right—a boy, really, in an army cap and square-rimmed glasses—pinched his lips and tried not to giggle at his leader's English. A rooster crowed in the distance. "You rain the bombs on Muslims," he said. "Next, insult of our Muslim sisters. Next, to destroy our mosques and madrassas. These are those actions which makes us ready to sacrifice ourselves in the way of almighty Allah. We are not suicide bombers. We have morals just like other young boys."

They walked over to a whiteboard that had been affixed to a mud wall and sat down as the leader lectured with a pointer, the camera rolling. The board was marked with red and blue lines and symbols—showing the base's concentric defenses, its fuel farms, and their chief target, the jets on the airfield. It was a crude but accurate map of the Third Marine Aircraft Wing at Camp Bastion.

As they made their final preparations in the quiet of the village, two Harrier jets roared out from the base and headed north, their wingtips glinting against the crystalline sky. To the enemy on the ground, they were as untouchable as the sun.

• • •

It was time to call in his approach. Lieutenant Colonel Christopher Raible, better known as "Otis" to his fellow Marines, was a big man, his frame and ham-hock arms filling the cramped cockpit of the Harrier, a machine that, after his fifteen years as a pilot, had become an extension of himself. A pugnacious little jet, it was built for close air support and vertical takeoffs and landings from improvised battlefield airstrips. None of that strike-from-10,000-foot business; the Harrier was more personal than that, designed

to get right on top of the Marine infantry it was supporting, so that the grunts could look up and see its stubby wings and know that American airpower had their asses covered.

Raible was almost a caricature of a Marine commander—intense blue eyes, blond widow's peak shaved high on the sides—and his personality mirrored the reputation of his aircraft: aggressive, in-your-face, but also precise. He had memorized encyclopedic levels of details about the Harrier's complex avionics and electrical systems, and he led his Harrier squadron, the Avengers, with intellect and discipline. He wasn't the kind of boss you always felt at ease around, but his troops loved him, wanted to do better for him. His wingman joked that Raible was his "dad."

That afternoon, September 14, 2012, the two pilots had flown out in support of a company of Marines on a routine patrol. They spent a dull three hours using the jets' scopes to scan roads and compounds for any sign of the Taliban. There wasn't much action these days; after three years of slaughter, the guerrillas had learned not to engage the Marines in open battle, where they would be punished from the skies. But the surge was over now, and the Americans were leaving, pulling back to their big bases and letting the Afghan army and police slug it out in the field with the Taliban. With the troop drawdown well under way, Americans were increasingly watching the war from the sidelines—and from above.

By the time Raible pushed forward on the controls and nosed the jet toward the dazzling beacon of Camp Bastion, darkness had descended on the desert plain. On a moonless night like this, the base looked freakishly bright, like an electrified island in an endless sea of black. There were almost 30,000 people living down there in that vast array of lights, spread across eight square miles, Marines and British soldiers and contractors, fenced in and inhabiting a world utterly separate from the country around them. The Brits had built Bastion back in 2006, but the Marine surge had made it big, and now, with its hospital and morgue, it was like a small city, staffed by armies of cooks and cleaners and supplied by a chain of fuel and food trucks coming in over the mountains from Pakistan. Ten years into the war, and the military had perfected the art of comfortable base living: Wi-Fi, surf-and-turf on holidays, Texas Hold 'Em tournaments in the rec center. The city-state of Bastion even had its own prince: the redheaded Captain Harry Wales, as Prince Harry was known on the base. He had arrived for a three-month tour flying an Apache helicopter, prompting a Taliban threat to kill or kidnap him. "We have informed our commanders in Helmand to do whatever they can to eliminate him," Taliban spokesman Zabiullah Mujahid had told the press four days earlier. The military laughed off the idea. "That's not a matter of concern," NATO chief Anders Fogh Rasmussen retorted. The Taliban infiltrating a base called Bastion and carrying off the fourth in line to the British throne? Absurd.

Raible switched to the airport's tower frequency and called in his approach.

"Tower, Heat One-Five, five-mile final, four down and locked."

"Roger Heat One-Five, clear to land, runway one-nine."

The jet leveled out as its nozzles rotated downward, the landing gear flexing as the aircraft settled onto the tarmac. Raible pushed the throttle forward and taxied to a spot amid the rest of the air wing—a billion-dollar string of pearls all painted in smoky Marine gray. He had a Skype date with his wife that night, and it was already past nine o'clock. There was still paperwork to do.

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The insurgents moved silently and swiftly in the dark, their packs heavy with weapons and ammunition, their sneakers padding gently against the hard dirt underfoot. They had split into three teams of five. The first group cut through the concertina wire at a bend in the fence on the edge of the perimeter. There were floodlights and guard towers every few hundred yards, but the soldiers manning them seemed oblivious. The team slipped through the second line of wire unnoticed and crept forward into the empty, broken terrain between the outer fence line and the airfield. Ahead, the lights of the airfield shone brightly, the orange light washing over the Marines' heavy transport helicopters; then the Ospreys, helicopter-plane hybrids; the attack helicopters, Huey gunships and sharklike Cobras; and at the far end, the "fast-movers,"

snub-nosed Harrier jump jets, loaded down with bombs and rockets.

Somehow they'd managed to walk undetected inside the massive base. Now there was nothing between them and their target. The first team headed for the Harriers.

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Around 10 p.m., at the attack-helicopter squadron, Captain John Buss was having a post-flight cigar with a fellow Cobra pilot, savoring mouthfuls of the cool night air and a full-bodied Nicaraguan Man o' War—it was the closest thing to a nightcap you could get on a dry base—when they heard gunfire coming from the Harrier compound next door. That's strange, he thought. Gunfire inside the wire? Buss and his friend drew their pistols—Beretta nine-millimeters—and hopped the blast barriers at the edge of their compound, then crossed a fifty-yard pool of unlit darkness that separated them from the Harrier squadron. Taking cover behind some construction equipment, Buss squinted at the jets, his eyes adjusting to the dim light, and spotted a strange-looking group of men wearing uniforms. Are they friendlies? he wondered. Then one of the men shouldered a rocket-propelled-grenade launcher and, taking aim, fired an RPG at one of the Harriers, which exploded into a massive ball of flame. Buss couldn't believe his eyes—it was like watching a movie.

Holy shit, he thought, they're not friendlies.

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At that moment, the helo-squadron commander, Lieutenant Colonel Stephen Lightfoot, was sitting at his desk about 200 yards away when the explosion rattled the walls in his office. Lightfoot, a rangy six feet one with the call sign "Beast," assumed the blast was just the bomb squad detonating unexploded munitions just outside the base, something they regularly did, though rarely this late at night.

Fifteen seconds later, he heard another, louder boom and got up to see what the hell was going on. He walked to the door, swung it open, and stood for a moment, staring open-mouthed: Out on the flight line, on the long strip of tarmac where the aircraft were parked, two \$30 million jets were engulfed in orange flames and billowing smoke.

More explosions sounded. Lightfoot figured the base was under mortar attack, and he joined a stream of Marines heading for the nearest bomb shelter. But—wait a minute. That was small-arms fire, a lot of it, coming from the Harrier squadron. This isn't indirect fire, he thought, it's a ground assault. Running back to the office, he yelled for the troops-in-contact alarm to be sounded. The siren would scramble a section of choppers on twenty-four-hour standby, the birds armed and fueled, the pilots dressed and sitting in the ready room. He usually sounded it when he got a call that the grunts had gotten into a gunfight with the Taliban and needed air support right away. Lightfoot had never imagined he'd be using it for his own protection.

As the horn wailed, Lightfoot rushed into his office, picked up the phone, and called the air wing's commanding officer. The general answered warmly—"Hey, Beast, how you doing?"—but when Lightfoot dropped the news of the attack, he immediately hung up and alerted the quick-reaction force, a British team trained specifically for airfield defense. The Brits were stationed on the other side of the base with the bulk of Camp Bastion's forces. Until they arrived, the Marines of the air wing were on their own.

Lightfoot went back outside and saw that his men had hauled out some spare machine guns that had been mounted on a group of helicopters. They were hunkering down on the perimeter of their compound. He turned to his maintenance officer. "How many more aircraft can we put in the air right now?"

"We got two Cobras and a Huey."

"Let's get 'em airborne ASAP," Lightfoot said.

The helos were no use sitting on the ground. Their fighting chance was in the air, and Lightfoot was going to pilot one of them.

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Raible was just minutes from seeing her face. He and his wife hadn't been able to talk or Skype all that much recently. Donnella was back with the kids at the squadron's home base in Yuma, Arizona, and said she didn't want him to lose focus during his first major command. It was true, seeing her did make it harder to be away, but that would all be over soon. In a month, the squadron would begin heading back to the United States, their deployment over, and Raible would figure out his next step. It was just desk jobs from here on with the Corps, and he'd be eligible for retirement in three years.

Raible had missed dinner hours and instead grabbed something from the sandwich bar with Major Greer Chambless, a fellow pilot. They were just outside Raible's room, on the second-story catwalk of the squadron barracks, when they heard the sound of a rocket. Looking north toward the flight line, they made out the distinctive streak of an RPG flashing across the sky. Raible kept the astonishment from his voice: "Go to your room and get your flak and Kevlar on, and meet me downstairs."

Ten minutes later, after driving his Toyota 4Runner the mile to the flight line—cautiously, with the lights off—Raible arrived at the hangars. Three of his jets were burning on the tarmac, the orange flames leaping against the darkened sky, a sickening sight. Raible led Chambless and a rifle-toting corporal to the main maintenance building. Its window had been shot out.

"Hey, is anybody in there?" he shouted.

"Who's there?" came the muffled response.

"It's the CO. I'm coming in, hold your fire!"

Around a dozen of the night crew's mechanics and supply clerks had barricaded themselves behind tool cabinets, the muzzles of their rifles trained on the doors. Someone had taken potshots at them through the windows, but they didn't know how many attackers were out there or whether they'd try to storm the building once they'd finished with the jets. To Raible's relief, there were no casualties reported. But no one had any idea where the enemy was. Raible needed answers. He remembered the secure telephone line in the squadron's headquarters next door. If he could raise Camp Bastion's main operations center, he'd get a better sense of what was going on and whether help was on the way.

Raible grabbed Chambless and the corporal and told the rest to hold tight. This was a three-man operation. Just outside the hangar, Raible spotted figures running out near the jets. "Hey!" he yelled, enraged, as if he'd spotted some delinquent Marines on his flight line. He leveled his Beretta and snapped off a few shots, the first he'd ever fired in combat. Muzzles flashed in response, and automatic-weapons fire ripped over his head. Raible yanked himself back behind a barrier—they were outgunned. Motioning for Chambless and the corporal to turn around, he dashed back into the maintenance space.

In the hangar, Raible looked at the faces of the night crew as they gathered to hear what their commander had to say. They looked tense and drawn—afraid, even. These guys normally wielded wrenches and equipment manifests. But a basic tenet of the Corps is that every Marine is a rifleman, and every one of these men had been trained in marksmanship and basic infantry tactics. They were ready to be led into battle.

Raible swept his gaze over the crew in front of him. "All right, I need ten Marines to go take the fight to these guys," he told them, and watched as each one of them gripped his rifle and stepped forward to volunteer. Raible swapped his pistol for an M-16 and led his group out into the night.

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It was twenty minutes into the attack. Sirens wailed as smoke and flames rose from the airfield. Camp Bastion's immense size had become its weakness; the attackers were running amok inside like tiny viruses. The base's operations center, located a couple of miles away, struggled to make sense of the reports it was receiving. Where had the attackers come from? Was the base also under mortar attack? And most important, how many insurgents were there?

Meanwhile, the second and third teams of Taliban fighters passed unimpeded through the hole in the perimeter fence. One five-man group, bent low with the weight of their ammunition, ran to the cryo facility, a lab between the fence and the flight line where Marines produced oxygen and nitrogen for their jets. Its concrete blast barriers, each about sixteen feet tall and ten feet wide—like highway dividers on steroids—formed a bunker from which the invaders could rake the airfield with a belt-fed machine gun. The other group of five moved purposefully toward their next target: the fuel farms, massive rubber bladders set inside earth embankments and with enough jet fuel to supply the whole air wing.

They would make perfect bombs.

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In a barrack just south of the fuel farm, a group of sergeants were sitting around watching Tupac Shakur's classic film *Juice* and doing what they normally did at night: bullshitting. That was how you unwound on base, in the absence of booze, civilian women, fast food, pretty much whatever you enjoyed when you weren't stuck in a camp surrounded by razor wire halfway around the world. Tonight's topic: street fights back home, the punches they'd given and received. Staff Sergeant Gustavo Delgado, 27, was built like a bulldog and liked to fight like one, or at least he used to, growing up around Chicago's Logan Square. That was before the Marines straightened him out, taught him to act like a professional.

None of the guys in the barracks were trigger-pullers or flyboys. They worked logistics, shipping parts and supplies to the other air-wing units in Afghanistan. But they were still at war, they were still doing something—that's what made it worthwhile, all the rules and the long days and bunk beds and graffitied bathroom stalls. The point was that you weren't back home getting drunk or married. You were doing something.

When they heard the first explosion, the sergeants walked outside and scanned the base. A few hundred yards to the north, the fuel farms were lit up with giant floodlights so sentries could keep an eye on them. As Delgado and his men looked on, an RPG suddenly streaked out of the darkness and slammed into one of the bladders. With a massive boom, the jet fuel ignited into a towering fireball, momentarily turning night into day.

Delgado could feel the blood pounding in his temples, a mix of fear and anger like he was back scrapping in Logan Square. Within minutes he'd mustered his unit and was down near the fuel farm, behind a blast barrier, exchanging fire with the insurgents. A series of explosions rocked their position, shrapnel screeching off the concrete. Someone was lobbing grenades. Delgado watched as a group of Marines at the northeast corner of the building started shouting and firing—they'd spotted an insurgent. Delgado ran to them and heard rounds slamming into the other side of the concrete barrier. Then he saw a figure in a U.S. Army uniform about thirty yards away. Delgado lined him up in his scope and fired, once, twice. He would later marvel at how calmly he had killed a man, yet at that moment there was only a kind of clarity, an imperative to act.

Farther out, near the cryo lab, he saw a machine gun open up, and he ducked down, the bullets ripping against the barrier. The insurgents were on top of them.

• • •

Back at the Harrier compound, things were getting ugly. The insurgents had taken cover behind one of the thick concrete walls and were unloading machine-gun fire and RPGs on the Marines. Earlier, hoping to outflank them, Raible and Chambless had launched a two-pronged counterstrike, with Raible leading a

charge out one door of the maintenance building and Chambless taking a second team out another. But now Chambless's crew was pinned down behind a Humvee, with no sign of Raible. We need a new plan, Chambless thought. I've got to find Otis. Suddenly there was the metallic clink of a grenade rolling under the truck, and Chambless flinched as the explosion blew one of the Marines into a ditch, lancing him with shrapnel. Chambless's ears were ringing. The noise around them was intensifying. The Harriers, burning wildly, carried up to 11,000 pounds of jet fuel, and by now the 300 explosive rounds from their cannons were starting to cook off, punctuating the night with hammering booms. His Marines were low on ammunition, but the enemy seemed to have an arsenal. The Marine who'd been hit by the grenade was bleeding badly. Chambless dashed back toward the maintenance building, searching for Raible. "Otis!" he yelled. "Otis!" But there was no answer.

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Ten thirty. Half an hour into the attack, and it was still chaos at the air wing. Marines fought in the darkness and confusion, each unit defending its own compound. An RPG took the life of Sergeant Bradley Atwell, the night's first American death. It seemed like the attackers were everywhere. Fifteen men had cast thousands into turmoil.

The sound of a faraway explosion shook awake Major Robb McDonald. He opened his eyes and listened. He had a youthful, finely set face that typically bore a genial expression, one that belied the fact that he was an unusually talented specialist in violence. McDonald had spent three tours as a forward air controller with Marine special operations in Afghanistan. Now he'd returned as a pilot to work under the command of his old friend Raible.

Something was seriously wrong. McDonald, with the sinewy build of a distance runner, jumped out of bed, grabbed his Beretta, and, dressed only in a pair of green running shorts, sprinted down to the main barracks. As he emerged from the darkness, a group of Marines nervously pointed their weapons at him. Someone said that Raible had already gone down to the jets. Still half-naked, McDonald grabbed some body armor, and a Marine gave him a flight suit and a pair of boots several sizes too small, which would leave crippling blisters on his feet the next day.

McDonald jogged the mile to the maintenance building and walked in, passing tired-looking Marines hunkered down in the hallway. He spotted Chambless; his face looked stricken.

"Six is dead," he said, using the shorthand for his commanding officer, Raible.

McDonald stared at his fellow pilot. "Show me where he is."

They walked into the equipment room, where Raible was lying on his back, covered by a blanket. McDonald crouched down beside his friend and pulled the blanket back. He had been badly wounded in the neck by shrapnel from an RPG. McDonald put his finger into the wounds and checked for a pulse. Nothing. He looked into Raible's open eyes, marveling for a last time at how blue they were. A hard blue, he thought. He took out Raible's wallet for safekeeping and then pulled the blanket back over, crossing his arms and legs and binding them with duct tape to make him easier to carry.

After he had prepared his friend's body, McDonald walked back into the hallway, where the demoralized Marines stared up at him. What the hell were they doing, all crammed in here like sitting ducks? He looked around at the thin aluminum walls of the hangar. If the insurgents wanted to, they could just walk up, empty their magazines, and smoke us all.

. . .

Five hundred feet above Camp Bastion, Lightfoot, the helo-squadron commander, pulled back on his control stick and brought the Cobra around in a slow loop over the base. The flying conditions were as wild as he had ever seen. Smoke from the flight line and fuel depots billowed up in impenetrable columns while blinding fires dotted the ground below. The night was so dark that even with his night-

vision goggles he couldn't see the horizon. It was instrument-only flying.

By 11 p.m., an hour after the battle had begun, the situation was beginning to come into focus for Lightfoot and the other commanders. The insurgents' target was clearly the air wing and its military hardware. The Harrier compound was a mess of burning jets, and down by the fuel farm there was another confused gun battle where the Marines had encountered the two teams of Taliban. The British force had finally gotten into the action, too. (By now, Prince Harry had been stashed in a secure location.) Up to this point it had been a slugfest on the ground, a close-quarters struggle that could go on for hours. If the Marines were going to end this without taking a lot of casualties, Lightfoot knew he had to bring his choppers' firepower to bear.

The trouble was distinguishing friend from foe. The attackers were wearing U.S. Army uniforms, and they were mixed in with Marine positions. Lightfoot radioed for another one of his Cobra pilots, Major Robert Weingart, to swoop down and take a closer look.

With a Huey gunship flying on his tail, Weingart darted in and out of the columns of smoke, trying to decipher the pinpricks of light below in the green field of his night vision. Are those muzzle flashes, or rounds cooking off, or what? His wingman's voice crackled over the radio: "Hey, we've got reports of insurgents in the cryogenics facility on the east side of the road." Weingart flew above the barren ground between the fence line and the airfield to take a look. There was definitely someone shooting from that position, but he couldn't be sure, even with his night vision, who it was. He couldn't risk strafing friendlies. Then he had an idea: He radioed the base operations center and directed the ground troops to fire in unison on the enemy's position. He'd use the gunfire, glowing in his night vision, to point the way to the enemy. Within minutes the quick-reaction force unleashed a bright green string of tracers onto the cryo facility. Target confirmed. Weingart lined up the Cobra on an attack run and let loose a long burst of explosive twenty-millimeter cannon rounds.

On the ground below, Delgado and his men, still pinned down by machine-gun fire, heard the rush of a helicopter coming in, followed by the roar of a chain gun. God what a beautiful sound, Delgado thought. The cryo plant lit up with hundreds of small explosions as the rounds impacted.

The Marines around him erupted in cheers. "Fuck yeah!" Delgado yelled.

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Where the hell were the insurgents? And how many of them were out there? McDonald had led the Marines out of the flimsy maintenance hangar into the relative safety of the squadron's headquarters building. But he still didn't have a fix on the enemy. So far, they'd located only a single injured attacker. McDonald spotted him through his rifle scope: a body lying flat about fifty yards away, against a concrete wall, wearing a U.S. Army uniform. The man looked gravely wounded. He had a beard, an AK-47, and some grenades and wore a pair of running sneakers. As McDonald watched through binoculars, the insurgent brought a can of spray paint to his face and, bizarrely, starting huffing it as an anesthetic. The guy was obviously messed up. Better to leave him for the quick-reaction team to capture. Maybe they could exploit him for intelligence.

McDonald had no idea how many attackers had slipped in, but he knew where he might find them: out on the flight line, looking for more aircraft to burn. He enlisted three Marines to have a look. "I'm gonna go count the jets," he quipped to a startled sentry on his way out.

McDonald took up a position behind a shipping container out on the tarmac. Set along the runway was a long line of blast barriers, designed to protect aircraft from incoming rockets and mortars. Leaving the three Marines to cover him, he sprinted up to the first barrier and came around it. And there, about thirty feet away, were four bearded Taliban in U.S. Army uniforms. The closest one was facing him, holding a huge belt-fed machine gun.

Oh shit. McDonald didn't hesitate: He raised his rifle and squeezed the trigger, hitting the gunner in the

face. He kept firing, and the rest of the group hit the ground, injured maybe but not dead. One grabbed the machine gun and loosed a long blast, the bullets ricocheting off the wall. McDonald ducked back; he tried to return fire but couldn't get an angle. He's in there pretty good, he thought. Then McDonald heard the thump-thump of helicopters overhead and started running back to headquarters, an idea forming in his head: He was going to call in an air strike on his own compound.

McDonald went into his office, picked up the radio, and got patched into the attack helicopters still circling. He talked them onto the insurgents' positions using the landmarks—barriers and buildings—they passed on the way to work everyday. The pilots were concerned; this was "danger close" to their headquarters. "Understand, I'm clear to engage your line?" the Huey pilots said warily.

"Yep, you're clear to engage," McDonald answered.

The Huey came around and dropped into a hover. Through the gunner's night-vision goggles, the four huddled attackers were silhouetted against the pale concrete. The gunship fired, and hundreds of rounds tore into the enemy, their bodies jerking back in a macabre dance before crumpling to the tarmac.

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When the British quick-reaction team eventually showed up twenty minutes later, McDonald came out with his arms in the air. He explained that his team was holed up in the headquarters building and that the choppers had killed four insurgents. Then he remembered the lone wounded attacker, who was still lying on the tarmac. "We got one guy alive up here. He's got a bunch of hand grenades and an AK-47. You guys wanna go pick him up, or—"

"Fuck that!" the Brit chief said. He wanted to wait for backup. "Everybody get back behind the walls."

"Well, hang on a second," McDonald said, and walked back to the headquarters building, retrieving his weapon and exiting through the back door. He shouldered his rifle and found the wounded insurgent in his scope. The bearded Talib had apparently seen the Brits and was now gripping his AK-47 and a grenade. McDonald took a breath to steady his aim and fired a couple of rounds into the man, who slumped lifelessly against the concrete. He calmly returned to the quick-reaction team and told them it was all clear.

Though the Brits on the ground and the choppers in the air would spend the rest of the night searching for more attackers, McDonald had killed the last of the fourteen Taliban who died that day. (Another was captured alive after being wounded.)

Later, in the pale glow of dawn, McDonald marveled at the destruction around him. Six Harrier jets, along with an Air Force C-130, had been reduced to burnt-out hulks spewing toxic smoke, and two more had been badly damaged. A stunning \$200 million worth of military hardware gone, two Marines dead, and over a dozen more American and British injured. A "secure" base completely compromised.

McDonald stood over the bodies of the men they had killed. They had genuine U.S. Army uniforms—which were often stolen from supply trucks and sold in Pakistan—with proper ranks and name tags. One guy's tag said Smith. Another's was on upside down. The rest of their gear was common stuff that McDonald had seen on dead Taliban before: RPGs, AK-47's, a cheap Chinese nine-millimeter pistol, running shoes, and bags of nuts and raisins. One of them had a pair of glasses that had fallen down across his slack mouth.

Fifteen men with rifles and raisins against the full might of U.S. and British military power. You had to admire their balls, McDonald thought. He didn't know whether to call it courage or what, but it was something.

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The Marines of the Third Air Wing were lauded as heroes by the Corps and the Pentagon. Their swift response to danger that night, mechanics and pilots turned defenders and riflemen, undoubtedly prevented a greater catastrophe. Raible, who died leading his men into battle, would be nominated for the Silver Star, the military's third-highest combat honor.

But a troubling question still lingers: How could fifteen insurgents have penetrated a mammoth base like Camp Bastion, inflicting the largest loss of American aircraft in combat since Vietnam?

According to an American official familiar with the after-attack inquiry, there had been warning signs. The Marines and British had caught lone men crawling inside the wire on several occasions in the months leading up to the attack. But the Marine leadership in Helmand, led by Major General Charles M. Gurganus, was managing a drawdown in forces as the surge came to an end. And a month before the attack, says the official, the Marines cut their forces assigned to patrol outside the wire from 325 down to one hundred—forces that might have caught the attackers before they struck.

After a decade on the offensive in Afghanistan, the U.S. military was now moving to a support role. Sensing this shift—and perhaps the inertia that comes with a less aggressive posture—the Taliban struck, hitting a jugular. The air-wing Marines, trusting the camp's defenses, had not heavily fortified their compounds. The Harrier squadron, in particular, was left almost entirely unsecured. That section of the fence line was controlled by the British, who had in turn delegated the guard-tower duty to a handful of soldiers from the minuscule South Pacific nation of Tonga, soldiers without night-vision gear whom the Marines had sometimes caught asleep on duty. For the families, this fact above all has been tough to accept. "Why would we entrust a tiny Third World country to safeguard our Marines?" asked Donnella Raible, who is now raising three kids on her own.

Deborah Hatheway, whose nephew, Sergeant Atwell, was also killed that night, remains furious at what she sees as a lack of accountability. "This was a 100 percent preventable attack," she told me. "Instead of stepping up to the plate and admitting their mistakes, all they want to do is cover it up."

The Marine Corps didn't initially launch a formal investigation into the attack—the kind that could lead to reprimands—and it has refused to release its after-battle inquiries. A Marine source told me that in March, in response to pressure from the families, the Senate stalled Gurganus's promotion to lieutenant general, after which the commandant asked CENTCOM—Central Command—to open a formal investigation. (CENTCOM declined to comment for this story.)

By February, five months after the attack, a new Marine air squadron had begun serving at Camp Bastion.

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