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Deadly Afghan ambush shows perils of ill-supplied deployment

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Manning a machine gun on a ridge overlooking this remote Afghan village, U.S. Marine Cpl. Steven Norman tried desperately to lay down covering fire for some 90 Afghan security forces and U.S. military trainers who were trapped in an ambush in the valley below.

Each time he'd raise his head to let loose a burst, however, the insurgents in the encircling mountains and the fortress-like hamlet itself would drive Norman down, drenching his position with cascades of machine gun and rocket-propelled grenade fire.

"I was pinned down hard core," recalled the slight 21-year-old from Moultrie, Ga., part of a team from the Okinawa-based 3rd Marine Division based in the nearby town of Sarkani. "I'd look where they were shooting, and I would shoot back. But I was pinned down."

Norman and other combat veterans who were caught in the Sept. 8 ambush that killed three U.S. Marines, a Navy corpsman and nine Afghans said it was the deadliest, most intense combat they'd faced in Afghanistan or Iraq. The insurgents never ran out of ammunition, they recalled, and some even wore helmets, flak jackets and military-style magazine pouches.

"They were firing from every direction. They were well placed. We could hardly see them," Norman said. "They were very coordinated in their fire. When we'd suppress that fire, they'd hit us from somewhere else."

The ambush and the nearly nine-hour battle in the rugged mountains of eastern Kunar province illustrated many of the toughest challenges inherited by the Obama administration and U.S. commanders and their soldiers, who're scrambling to regain the upper hand in an eight-year-old guerrilla war that's growing bloodier and more unpopular in both countries by the day.

Intelligence is inadequate. The Afghans and their U.S. trainers expected to face no more than a dozen insurgents in Ganjgal on their mission to sweep the village for arms and meet with the elders to discuss implementing an agreement to accept the local government's authority.

Instead, the contingent of 80 Afghan troops and border police and about a dozen U.S. military trainers walked into a three-sided storm of fire from automatic weapons, rocket-propelled grenades, mortars and at least one recoilless rifle.

The lack of timely air support - it took about 80 minutes by a reporter's watch for helicopters to arrive, despite assurances that they'd be five minutes away - was a consequence of the manpower and equipment shortages bequeathed by the Bush administration's failure to secure Afghanistan against a resurgence of the Taliban, al-Qaida and allied groups before turning to invade Iraq.

There are a limited number of U.S. helicopters in Kunar, a stretch of craggy mountains and serpentine valleys bordering Pakistan where airpower gives a vital edge to overstretched U.S. troops fighting guerrillas who know every nook and trail of the area. Unbeknownst to those trapped in the Ganjgal kill zone, however, the available aircraft were tied up in the Shiryak Valley to the north in a battle in which two pilots were wounded, U.S. commanders said.

The denial of heavy artillery fire to those trapped in Ganjgal also has roots in the Bush administration's decision to divert resources to Iraq and the resulting stress on the U.S. military.

New rules limiting the use of artillery imposed by U.S. Army Gen. Stanley A. McChrystal after he took command of the U.S.-led international force in Afghanistan this summer are intended to curb civilian casualties caused in part by his contingent's reliance on artillery barrages and air strikes to compensate for their shortage of ground troops.

The rising toll has enraged ordinary Afghans, whose support is key to the U.S. goal of marginalizing the hardest

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core insurgents. It's also provided the Taliban with recruits and a propaganda bonanza and allowed Afghan President Hamid Karzai to score domestic political points by deflecting blame for the deepening crisis onto his American and European patrons.

The worst single loss of U.S. military trainers of the war brought out the deep bitterness with which many soldiers view the new rules. They feel unfairly handcuffed, especially in the case of Ganjgal, where women and children were seen running ammunition and weapons to gunmen firing from inside the hilltop hamlet.

There are circumstances - and Ganjgal was one - when the rulebook should be tossed out, they said.

"We basically screwed our guys over," said Marine Cpl. Dakota Meyer, 21, of Greensburg, Ky., who braved enemy fire to retrieve the bodies of his fallen comrades from outside the village. "They expect us to bring stuff to the fight, and (U.S. commanders) didn't give it to us."

That anger was magnified by a realization that the insurgents in Ganjgal had somehow learned of the operation in advance and were waiting for the contingent to enter the valley as the sun rose.

"We walked right into it," Marine Maj. Kevin Williams, of Louisville, Ky., the trainers' commander, said ruefully as he nursed a wounded forearm.

Their Afghan counterparts, who arrested two of nearly 30 suspects rounded up in the village after the insurgents withdrew, shared the Americans' frustration.

Col. Mohammad Avzal, the commander of the Afghan army unit the Marines are training, said the insurgents were waiting in dense groves and villages nearby to return to Ganjgal after Afghan and U.S. forces departed again. That means another battle and more casualties are in the offing.

"We are angry that we pulled out," said Avzal, who walked the same trails and hid in the same caves when he fought as a guerrilla against the 1979-89 Soviet occupation of Afghanistan, a day after the ambush. "But we would have had to continue the mission in that valley for at least three days."

As they waited to infiltrate back into the village, the guerrillas were heard discussing on their radios "everything that happened, about their guys who got killed and how their (duffel) bags are still left inside Ganjgal," said Marine Lt. Ademola Fabayo, 28, of New York City, who helped lead the operation.

The failed operation drove home other problems and complexities that U.S.-led forces are grappling with as they pursue President Barack Obama's counterinsurgency policy of redoubling underfunded civilian aid programs and transferring greater responsibility to the Afghans for running their own affairs.

Ganjgal and villages farther into the mountains are way stations on a traditional smuggling route that insurgents use to move men and weapons into Afghanistan from Pakistan, unhindered by Pakistani security forces, according to U.S. and Afghan officers.

Insurgents also use the area around the hamlet to fire rockets and mortars into U.S. Forward Operating Base Joyce with such frequency that the stronghold where the U.S. trainers and the Afghan troops live has been christened "Rocket City."

So when Afghan Border Police commanders developed an idea to extend the government's writ to the area, U.S. officers jumped at it, despite the contingent's reputation as the most corrupt of Afghanistan's security organizations.

Not only might such an operation smother the rocket fire on the U.S. base, but it also could kick-start reconstruction projects and help build cooperation between the two Afghan forces, which the U.S. trainers said is essential to weaning them from their dependency on the U.S. military.

The border police proposed that the Afghans and their U.S. trainers mount a patrol into Damdara, an insurgent-controlled village near Ganjgal, to convince the area's elders that they'd receive protection against the insurgents and U.S.-funded aid projects if they accepted the authority of the local government.

Avzal's officers agreed to participate, but in return they demanded the border police's commitment to stage a similar operation into Ganjgal, U.S. and Afghan officials said.

The plan initially succeeded. The operation earlier this month into Damdara - which ended with the insurgents turning loose some desultory Kalashnikov rifle fire and a rocket-propelled grenade that caused no casualties as the Afghans and Americans exited the area - appeared to convince the elders in Ganjgal to renounce the Taliban.

They broadcast a renunciation and their willingness to accept the local government's writ over the local radio after negotiations with Afghan and U.S. officials.

Afghan army officers drew up a plan for a weapons search and a meeting with the Ganjgal elders to discuss the establishment of Afghan police patrols. U.S. officers refined the plan.

Then things began to go wrong.

The operation was first set for Sept. 7. A day earlier, Marine Lt. Fabayo; Army Capt. William Swenson, of Seattle, a border police trainer; and Capt. Talib, the Afghan army officer who developed the plan, met with Lt. Mohammad Nader, the border police operations officer, to finalize his unit's participation. A reporter sat in on the meeting.

"I'm not ready for this mission," Nader said. "The group that you are trying to get for this mission is (committed to) escorting a supply convoy."

The others were stunned. They worried that a delay would give the insurgents time to take revenge on the elders or force them to renege. Swenson asked to speak to Nader's superior. He was resting and refused to leave his room.

"Let's do the mission concept at least," Swenson told Nader. "We can do the timeline and the concept, but just not what day we will do this. We can let this slip to another day."

"All's I'm saying is that I have to get ready for the escort mission," Nader replied. "We will be talking about a plan without the approval of the commanders."

The effort to hammer out a compromise was further hampered by the need to translate between English and Nader's Pashtu, one of Afghanistan's two main languages, and also by translations between Nader and Talib, who speaks only Dari, the country's other major tongue.

Meeting later with staff officers from the 10th Mountain Division's "Task Force Chosin," Fabayo and Swenson discussed alternatives to delaying the operation, including using ordinary Afghan police to replace the border unit. They rejected the idea, reasoning that ordinary cops were no substitute for border officers, who're trained and equipped as light infantry.

Moreover, the pair worried that they'd compromise their goal of building trust and cooperation between the border police and the army.

The meeting ended with a decision to delay the operation by a day while the border police commander, who was on leave in Kabul, was contacted and persuaded to order his unit to participate, even though that meant losing the helicopter cover that had been reserved for the operation on Sept. 7.

It was then that the "Task Force Chosin" delegation assured Fabayo and Swenson that if they were needed, helicopters would "be five minutes away."

At the same meeting, a warning that Nader sounded to mission planners became the epitaph of the mission.

"The Ganjgal people have an expression," he said: "It's up to you to come into the valley, but it's up to us to let you out."

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