

The New York Times

This copy is for your personal, noncommercial use only. You can order presentation-ready copies for distribution to your colleagues, clients or customers [here](#) or use the "Reprints" tool that appears next to any article. Visit www.nytreprints.com for samples and additional information. [Order a reprint of this article now.](#)

PRINTER-FRIENDLY FORMAT
SPONSORED BY

(500) DAYS OF
SUMMER

April 20, 2009

A Blast, an Ambush and a Sprint Out of a Taliban Kill Zone

By [C. J. CHIVERS](#)

ALIABAD, [Afghanistan](#) — The two [Army](#) lieutenants crouched against boulders beside the Korangal River. [Taliban](#) gunfire poured down from villages and cliffs above, hitting tree branches and rocks and snapping as the bullets passed over the officers' helmets.

An American platoon was pinned in the riverbed, which had blossomed into a kill zone. One squad and the radio operator were trapped in a wheat field on the far side. An improvised bomb had just exploded in their midst. The blast wave had blown the soldiers down, and, though the platoon did not yet know it, killed a soldier on the trail.

The platoon leader, company executive officer and another squad crouched exposed at a stream junction, trying to arrange help as the bomb's smoke drifted through the misty rain. A third squad was on the slope behind them, returning fire.

Two footbridges separated the three American groups. No one could run across them during fire like this.

Another pitched firefight in a ravine in eastern Afghanistan had begun, shaped by factors that have made the war against the Taliban seem unending: grueling terrain that favors ambushes and prevents American soldiers from massing; villages in thorough collaboration with insurgents; and experienced adversaries each fighting in concert with its abilities and advantages.

The Taliban fighters had struck with surprise, stealth and familiarity with the ground, executing the sort of ambush that Afghan guerrillas have mastered for generations.

The Americans, seasoned by years of war here and in Iraq, would seek to create an intricately violent response, designed to undo the odds, save the pinned soldiers and kill the insurgents who, for a moment, had shown themselves.

Second Lt. Justin R. Smith, the platoon leader, called for help from an artillery battery, then radioed Sgt. Craig W. Tanner, the squad leader on the opposite side. Each man had found
nytimes.com/2009/.../20ambush.html...

radioed Sgt. Craig W. Tanner, the squad leader on the opposite side. Each man had found what cover he could. The platoon would fight where it was.

“Lead element: stand by where you’re at,” the lieutenant said. “If you come back across the river you’re going to expose yourself.” He glanced across the water at his radio operator, Specialist Robert Soto. “Soto!” he shouted. “Stay there! Stay! There!”

There are moments in many firefights that verge on chaos. This was one of them. Specialist Soto’s ears were ringing. He could not hear. “We gotta move!” he shouted.

•

The American patrol had left Korangal Outpost, the base for Company B of the First Battalion, 26th Infantry, on Wednesday, roughly an hour before the ambush. Its mission had been to enter the village of Laneyal and meet with local elders.

Preparing for the mission, the company’s Second Platoon had predicted a fight. The platoon had ambushed a Taliban unit a few days before, killing at least 13 insurgents. The Taliban would want revenge, said Sgt. First Class Thomas Wright, the platoon sergeant, and a patrol to Laneyal meant a walk into a bad village.

Afghanistan is myriad wars within a war, with varying terrain, climates, economies and insurgent groups creating a puzzle of shifting contests for influence. The Korangal Valley is the center of one of the most vicious contests of all.

Relatively few Arabs or foreigners come here, the company’s officers say. But the Korangalis, a hardened and isolated people with their own language, have managed to lock the American Army into a bloody standoff for a small space for more than three years.

The Korangalis have fought, the officers say, in part because they support the Taliban and in part because they are loggers and the Afghan government banned almost all timber cutting, putting local men out of work.

Korangal Outpost itself symbolizes the dispute. It occupies a former sawmill, and the mill’s displaced owner is a main organizer of the insurgency. The Taliban pay the best wages in the valley now, the officers said.

Company B’s relations with local villagers are cordial but ultimately unhelpful, undermined by deception. After the platoon ambushed the Taliban patrol several days earlier, for instance, elders arrived at the outpost to say that the Americans had shot up a search party of local men who were looking for a lost girl. The company commander, Capt. James C. Howell, told the elders it was one of the most ridiculous lies he had ever heard.

•

The platoon reached Aliabad, the village on the slope opposite Laneyal, and began the descent down a stone staircase to the river. On the way down they met Zarin, an elder from Laneyal, who was heading up.

Zarin exchanged pleasantries and shook hands with Company B's executive officer, First Lt. John P. Rodriguez, and bounded quickly away.

The platoon continued on. With several soldiers remaining in Aliabad with guns aimed at the opposite side, two squads and the officers crossed a narrow footbridge and reached a point where two branches of the river converge.

Then the lead squad crossed the second bridge, entering a terraced wheat field. The Taliban let the first five men cross, then detonated the bomb under Pfc. Richard A. Dewater, 21, as he walked up the trail. It was a huge explosion, heaving dirt and rock high in the air.

The Taliban opened fire. The ambush was on.

Lieutenant Smith asked Sergeant Tanner for a report. The blast had blown the sergeant off his feet, spinning him around and throwing him down. He was disoriented. He said he thought he had all of his men.

As the firing neared its peak, Lieutenant Smith ordered the men around him to disperse so they could not all be struck by a single burst of fire. Then he provided covering fire so the artillery observer and a machine gun team could run back across the first bridge, gain elevation in Aliabad and cover the squad in the field.

A soldier caught in an ambush — looking for safety while returning fire, with ears ringing and skin pouring sweat — can feel utterly alone, trapped in a box of crisscrossing lead and terrifying sound, with death an instant away.

He is actually part of something more complicated. Bullets flew down into the riverbed from three sides. But as the lieutenants worked their radios, soldiers outside the kill zone were trying to erode the Taliban's opening advantage.

Within the platoon, the squad in the rear of the column set up its machine guns and was firing on several of the Taliban shooting positions. A group of Afghan National Army soldiers, directed by a Marine corporal, was also firing.

In American firebases on ridges along the valley, soldiers with heavier machine guns and automatic grenade launchers focused on Afghan buildings in three villages — Donga, Laneyal and Darbart — from where the trapped platoon was taking fire.

Farther back, at Company B's outpost, a pair of Air Force noncommissioned officers was directing aircraft into position, while two 120-millimeter mortars were firing high-explosive and [white phosphorus](#) rounds at targets the platoon had identified.

Alternately crouched and standing on the open rock spur, the lieutenants rushed to influence the fight and plan an escape from the trap. Once the American response began to build and the Taliban firing subsided, Lieutenant Rodriguez told Lieutenant Smith, they would throw smoke grenades along the river bank and pull back.

Specialist Soto could not wait. After mortar rounds began landing, he and a photographer for The New York Times dashed down the bank, splashed into the chest-deep brown river, lunged across the current and crawled out on the opposite side.

They staggered up the Aliabad slope and slipped behind a building as the platoon's guns fired, covering their dash. They had made it out of the worst of the kill zone.

The Taliban kept firing. The American squad in the wheat field, perhaps 50 yards away, radioed that insurgents were getting closer and that the soldiers risked being overrun. At almost the same time, Air Force Staff Sgt. Kenneth Walker radioed Lieutenant Rodriguez with news that the first 500-pound aircraft bomb was about to strike.

"They're going to do the drop in, like, 30 seconds!" Lieutenant Rodriguez shouted to Lieutenant Smith. "Let your boys know!"

The aircraft had arrived just in time. A Taliban fighter appeared behind a stone fence. He was almost atop the soldiers in the field.

"We got muzzle flashes," Lieutenant Smith said, and now the Americans had clear targets. The stones beside where the Taliban fighter had stood began to splinter as the platoon's bullets struck it. Then the satellite-guided bomb whooshed in and exploded.

Two stray rocket-propelled grenades landed to the lieutenants' left side. But the Taliban's firing decreased, as if the insurgents, experienced with American tactics, had sensed the battle shifting and were being ordered back.

The platoon threw smoke grenades, obscuring visibility in the riverbed. Five soldiers appeared at the edge of the green stand of wheat, running toward the officers.

They leapt into the water. The two lieutenants had spent the fight exposed; now they ran back across the first footbridge. The platoon climbed the steep staircase into Aliabad and took cover.

As the soldiers panted for air, they cursed Zarin, the elder who had walked through the kill zone just before the ambush; he had set them up, they said.

Two more airstrikes blew apart two buildings on the opposite side from where the Taliban had been firing. The battle quieted.

Pfc. Rogger J. Webb looked at Specialist Soto, the last man to cross the bridge before the

bomb had exploded on the trail. “Man, I thought —” he said.

“You thought I was gone?” Specialist Soto said.

Private Webb nodded. The platoon did a head count and came to an awful realization: Private Dewater was missing. He had walked into the wheat field with the squad. He had not run out.

Private Webb swore. Had the Taliban captured him? Had he been struck during the fight? The soldiers did not know. The platoon retraced its steps toward Laneyal as the sun set.

•

Back at the outpost, American and Afghan soldiers flowed out into the darkness. The Afghans would scour the riverbed in case the missing soldier had ended up in the water. The captain told the platoons to be prepared to search every house in the villages, in case the Taliban had dragged him off.

Wearing night-vision equipment, the platoon combed the ambush site in the rain. The company waited for news. At 8:10 p.m., Specialist Soto’s strained voice came over the radio.

“Break, break, break,” he said, using the convention for stopping all conversations.

Everyone knew what it meant. Lieutenant Smith’s voice replaced Specialist Soto’s. “We found him,” he said. The first explosion had killed Private Dewater and lifted his body into a tree.

“Roger,” the captain answered. “Understand all.”

Sgt. Matthew R. Kuhn climbed the branches to free the missing man. In an instant, Second Platoon’s mission had changed. It would carry Private Dewater on the first steps of his journey home.

The soldiers gently rested their friend onto a stretcher, organized into teams of litter bearers and began the long walk back, over the two footbridges, up the Aliabad staircase and past the other soldiers and [Marines](#), who provided security and stood quietly in respect.

He was the fourth member of Second Platoon killed during nine months in the valley.

When the platoon reached its outpost at midnight, the company’s commander, Captain Howell, was waiting. The soldiers gathered in the darkness. The captain spoke of his pride in the platoon and offered the first of many words of condolence.

“There is nothing I can say or anybody else can say that will bring Dewater back,” he said, and reminded the platoon of its own ambush of the Taliban the week before. “But the best thing we can do for him is to continue to do the type of stuff that you guys did the other day.”

4/20/2009

A Blast, an Ambush and a Sprint Out ...

The soldiers headed for the plywood shacks where they live, for the remainder of a night in which almost no one would sleep.

In the morning they disassembled and cleaned their weapons and recalled their friend as they played his favorite song: "Nothing Else Matters," by [Metallica](#). A heap of their bloody clothes burned in a small fire.

Private Dewater had been a combat replacement in the platoon: "A real humble dude, and totally positive about everything we did," Specialist Soto said.

His body had already been flown off the outpost by helicopter in the night, the next step of the trip back to the United States.

A few hours later, the soldiers slipped into their body armor and helmets, hoisted their weapons and walked back out for an overnight patrol.

[Copyright 2009 The New York Times Company](#)

[Privacy Policy](#) | [Search](#) | [Corrections](#) | [RSS](#) | [First Look](#) | [Help](#) | [Contact Us](#) | [Work for Us](#) | [Site Map](#)
