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Grim Milestone: 1,000 Americans Dead

By JAMES DAO and ANDREW W. LEHREN
Published: May 18, 2010

He was an irreverent teenager with a pregnant girlfriend when the idea first crossed his mind: Join the Army, raise a family. She had an abortion, but the idea remained. Patrick S. Fitzgibbon, Saint Paddy to his friends, became Private Fitzgibbon. Three months out of basic training, he went to war.

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David Goldman/Associated Press

An Army helicopter arriving last August to evacuate soldiers wounded after their armored vehicle hit an I.E.D. in the Tangi Valley in Afghanistan's Wardak Province. American troops are dying younger, often fresh out of boot camp, and are frequently victims of homemade bombs.

From his outpost in the Kandahar Province of [Afghanistan](#), he complained to his father about shortages of cigarettes, Skittles and Mountain Dew. But he took pride in his work and volunteered for patrols. On Aug. 1, 2009, while on one of those missions, Private Fitzgibbon stepped on a metal plate wired to a bomb buried in the sunbaked earth. The blue sky turned brown with dust.

The explosion instantly killed Private Fitzgibbon, 19, of Knoxville, Tenn., and Cpl. Jonathan M. Walls, a 27-year-old father from Colorado Springs. An hour later, a third soldier who was helping secure the area, Pfc. Richard K. Jones, 21, of Roxboro, N.C., died from another hidden bomb. The two blasts wounded at least 10 other soldiers.

At War

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On Tuesday, the toll of American dead in Afghanistan passed 1,000, after a suicide bomb in Kabul killed at least five United States service members. Having taken nearly seven years to reach the first 500 dead, the war killed the second 500 in fewer than two. A resurgent [Taliban](#) active in almost every province, a weak central government incapable of protecting its people and a larger number of American troops in harm's way all contributed to the accelerating pace of death.

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The mayhem of last August, coming as Afghans were holding national elections, provided a wake-up call to many Americans about the deteriorating conditions in the country. Forty-seven American G.I.'s died that month, more than double the previous August, making it the deadliest month in the deadliest year of the war.



[Five Fronts in the War in Afghanistan](#)

In many ways, Private Fitzgibbon typified the new wave of combat deaths. American troops are dying younger, often fresh out of boot camp, military records show. From 2002 to 2008, the average age of service members killed in action in Afghanistan was about 28; last year, it dropped to 26.

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Steve Ruark/Associated Press

Servicemen unloading the remains of Pfc. Patrick S. Fitzgibbon at Dover Air Force Base in Delaware. Private Fitzgibbon, 19, died Aug. 1 in Kandahar Province after stepping on a plate wired to an I.E.D.

This year, the more than 125 troops killed in combat were on average 25 years old.

In the last two years, the number of troops killed by homemade bombs, which the military calls [improvised explosive devices](#), or I.E.D.'s, increased significantly. Earlier in the war, rocket-propelled grenades and small arms fire took the largest number of American lives. But in 2008, for the first time, more than half of American combat deaths were the result of I.E.D.'s, which — just as they did in Iraq — have become both more powerful and more plentiful in Afghanistan.

Those I.E.D. deaths have increasingly come in batches: Last August, for instance, 17 of the 25 deaths caused by I.E.D.'s — including the one that killed Private Fitzgibbon and Corporal Walls — involved attacks in which more than one

soldier or Marine died. In future histories, the summer of 2009 may stand as a turning point in the war, a moment when not only the American public began paying attention again to Afghanistan, but when the Obama administration felt compelled to review and revise its entire approach to the war.

The warm months have long been the prime fighting season in Afghanistan, when insurgents have emerged from mountain havens to plot ambushes and recruit new fighters. But in the weeks before the August presidential elections last year, the Taliban's reach was wider and more potent than at any time since they were driven from power.

Not only did the number of I.E.D. attacks and suicide bombings jump, but the devices themselves became more powerful, capable of flipping or tearing holes into heavily armored vehicles that had once seemed impervious. A bomb estimated at 2,000 pounds killed seven American soldiers and their interpreter riding in a troop carrier last fall.

July, August, September and October went on record as the four deadliest months for American troops since the war began.

After receiving an alarming report about the war from his top commander in Afghanistan, [President Obama](#) last fall ordered 30,000 more troops into the war, most of whom will be in place by this summer.

But in calling for more troops, Mr. Obama and other supporters of the new surge warned that casualties, American and Afghan, were almost certain to rise before security improved. The fierce fighting in Helmand Province this year has proved them right, with 16 combat dead in February, compared with just 2 the previous February.

"If the Taliban has obtained political control over important parts of the country, the only way it will get better is if we introduce military forces and contest their control," said Steven Biddle, a defense policy expert at the [Council on Foreign Relations](#) who was part of a group that reviewed American strategy last summer. "And that's going to get people killed: their people, our people and civilians."

Good Days and Bad

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