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Grim Milestone: 1,000 Americans Dead

By **JAMES DAO** and **ANDREW W. LEHREN**

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.

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.

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.

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.

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. 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

They did not know each other well. But the three soldiers from Charlie Company, First Battalion, 12th Infantry Regiment, 4th Infantry Division out of Fort Carson, Colo., shared a few things in common. All had weathered the breakup of their parents’ marriages. None liked school much. And all viewed the Army as a path to a better life.

Pfc. Richard K. Jones had been a star high school wrestler in Person, N.C., near the Virginia border. All arms and legs at 6-foot-2 and 152 pounds, he made it to the state championships one year. The sport gave his life discipline, his mother said, and he thought the Army would be the perfect place to channel it.

His mother, Franceen Ridgeway, prevailed on him to try college instead. But after earning an associate’s degree and working as a diesel mechanic for a short time, he asked his mother to support his military ambitions. She consented, saying, “Maybe it’s what God wants you to do.”

He graduated from basic training in late January 2009 and was in Afghanistan by May. In one firefight, Private Jones fell and dislocated his shoulder. But the medics popped it back in, gave him a few days off and then returned him to duty.

“He wasn’t into death or dying,” Ms. Ridgeway said. “To him, it was an honor to be a soldier. And it was a chance to see the world, to get away from a small town. Maybe he was thinking he might never have that opportunity again.”

Cpl. Jonathan Walls was the son of a Navy man, but he played soldier from the time he could hold a toy gun, his mother, Lisa Rowe, said. In the woods outside Reading, Pa., he spent innumerable hours hunting, target shooting and playing paintball. After high school, he tried community college and worked at a Lowe’s. But only the military captured his imagination, and he enlisted in 2005. By 2007, he was in Iraq.

Roadside bombs there gave him a mild [traumatic brain injury](#), Ms. Rowe said, and he returned home suffering migraine headaches that made it difficult to sleep. Nevertheless, he received orders to deploy to Afghanistan, arriving there last May, three months after the birth of his third child.

“I thought they might not send him so that his brain could simmer down,” Ms. Rowe said. “But we’re in a time of war. He said, ‘Ma, it’s my duty.’ ”

On the day before Charlie Company deployed last summer, Private Fitzgibbon took a bunch of soldiers to a strip club near Fort Carson, running up a \$3,400 tab that his father paid off. It was typical Patrick. Charmingly roguish, he wore his hair in a brightly tinted Mohawk, drilled holes the size of nickels into his ear lobes and posted comedic homemade videos on YouTube. The military did not seem a natural fit.

But after his girlfriend got pregnant two years ago, he vowed to support her and the child by joining the Army. He was devastated when she had an abortion, his father said, and decided to enlist anyway. Boot camp changed him.

“He went from not caring about nothing to knowing he had responsibilities,” his father, Donald Fitzgibbon, 39, said. “All in a matter of months.”

The day the three men died began with a reconnaissance patrol along dirt paths lined by grape arbors in a place called Mushan Village. By 8:30 a.m., the temperature was already over 100 degrees. After resting in the shade of a mud-brick compound, the soldiers gave brief chase to a pair of suspicious-looking men. But their sergeant ordered them to fall back, worrying about an I.E.D. trap. A few minutes later, Private Fitzgibbon stepped on the pressure plate.

One of the first medics on the scene was Private Fitzgibbon’s best friend in the unit. For weeks afterward, the medic felt ripped by guilt because he could not save Private Fitzgibbon or Corporal Walls. Mr. Fitzgibbon tried to ease his grief, telling him, “God knows when it’s your turn.”

Now and again the private’s father consoles himself with the same thought.

“I feel he would have died whether he was here or in Afghanistan, and that gives me peace with it,” Mr. Fitzgibbon said. “But I still have my good days and bad days.”

‘A Resilient Insurgency’

Just as Private Fitzgibbon’s platoon was making its first forays into Kandahar Province last year, Gen. [Stanley A. McChrystal](#), the top American commander in Afghanistan, was dispatching a team of experts to review American strategy.

As the group traveled the country last June, they were troubled by how little American intelligence officers seemed to know about local conditions, some of the members said in interviews later. The Taliban had established shadow governors in many provinces and were

waging intimidation campaigns against village leaders who defied them.

Yet American commanders did not seem to have answers to some basic questions, group members said. How many district governors spend the nights in their districts? How many police checkpoints are manned on a given day? No one seemed to know.

To many on the panel, the poor intelligence was a sign that American forces could not secure their operating areas and lacked strong relationships with local leaders.

Their final report, endorsed by General McChrystal, concluded that “the situation in Afghanistan is serious” and that American forces faced “a resilient and growing insurgency.”

The solution, many panel members felt, was to increase the presence of American troops. They argued that the situation could be reversed with a new commitment to protecting population centers, a strategy known as counterinsurgency.

Not all of the members agreed. Some argued that sending more troops would simply increase civilian casualties and ultimately aid Taliban recruiting.

“McChrystal’s assessment of what went wrong is accurate but his solution is 180-degrees wrong,” said one of the dissenters, Luis Peral, a research fellow at the [European Union’s Institute for Security Studies](#) in Paris, in a recent interview.

But that view did not prevail. Under General McChrystal’s signature, the final report landed on Secretary of Defense [Robert M. Gates’s](#) desk on Aug. 30.

The next day, three more American soldiers died in southern Afghanistan.

‘To Grow Me Up’

Pfc. Jordan M. Brochu was one of them.

An adopted child, he had lived in many places but carried himself with a confidence, some said swagger, that belied the disruptions in his life. Perhaps it was his build: 6-foot-1 and muscular, he was a natural athlete who threw the discus for the first time as a senior in high school yet still qualified for the state championships.

But he had another side as well, writing poetry, playing the violin — lovingly, if not proficiently — and cooking. He considered becoming a chef, but jobs were scarce in western Maine, where he attended high school. So upon graduating in 2008, he chose the Army, “to help make a difference and to grow me up,” he declared on his [MySpace](#) page.

Before deploying to Afghanistan last year, his culinary arts teacher asked him for a photograph to hang in the classroom as a reminder of the war. With a smile and a touch of bravado, Private Brochu declined.

“Don’t stress it, Mr. B,” he told the teacher, Eric Botka. “I’ll see you when I get home.”

On Aug. 31, while Private Brochu was on foot patrol in the Arghandab River Valley of Kandahar Province, a mine detonated and killed him at the age of 20, along with another soldier, Specialist Jonathan D. Welch. Before the day was over, a third soldier from their unit, the First Battalion, 17th Infantry Regiment out of Fort Lewis, Wash., would be killed. By this week, the battalion had lost 21 soldiers in Afghanistan in less than a year.

Raised in Orange County, Calif., Specialist Welch, 19, was from a close-knit, deeply Christian family. But he rebelled in his freshman year of high school, drinking heavily, using methamphetamine and living on the streets for weeks before his parents sent him to a rehabilitation clinic in Mexico.

When he was 17, Specialist Welch and a good friend decided to visit a military recruiting station. His friend joined the Navy but Specialist Welch chose the Army, declaring, “I just want to shoot a gun.” His parents grudgingly consented.

“You see your child so lost with the drugs, and then you see him saying: ‘I’m passionate about this,’ ” recalled his father, Ben Storll, 47. “The only thing he was passionate about before was punk rock music.”

In Afghanistan, he became close to his fire team leader, Sgt. Drew McComber, who was badly wounded in the explosion that killed Specialist Welch. In a letter to the specialist’s parents, Sergeant McComber described the soldier as his “go-to guy for everything.”

“Thank you so much for supporting him through his wilder days when he was younger,” Sergeant McComber wrote from his hospital bed. “I’ve seen the pictures. He certainly has come a long ways in a very short time.”