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In Ambush, a Glimpse of a Long Afghan Summer

By **C. J. CHIVERS**

BALUCH, Afghanistan — Minutes after surviving the first ambush, Cpl. John M. Boone, a Marine sniper, called over his radio. “We’ve got a civilian here who got shot in his gut,” he said.

The civilian, Mohammed, an elderly Afghan farmer, had been shot through his large intestine when the **Taliban** fired on a patrol from Third Battalion, Sixth **Marines**. The Marines had just found him curled on the ground. Already time was pressing.

“Hey, this guy is going to die if we don’t medevac him,” the corporal said. “His guts are hanging out.”

It was 7:45 a.m. on Tuesday, just over two hours into a patrol that was turning into a gunfight on turf where the Taliban had a persistent hold. For now, the tree lines from where the Taliban had been shooting were quiet. But everyone expected more gunfire, and Mohammed needed help.

A new fighting season has begun around Marja, a richly irrigated zone of farming villages in Helmand Province that was both the center of **Afghanistan’s** opium production and a haven for its insurgency. Three months ago, thousands of Marines and Afghan soldiers swept into this area. The goal was to chase away the Taliban, disrupt the drug trade and usher in a government presence that might bring Marja under national control.

After roughly a week of often intensive fighting, the Taliban were unable to prevent the Marines and the Afghan soldiers they brought with them from opening roads, building outposts, importing Afghan officials and starting outreach programs for villagers caught between the two sides.

But with the opium crop now harvested, and temperatures rising with summer’s approach, **the Taliban have tried to exert influence anew**. They do so not just with hidden bombs and a

campaign of intimidation against civilians suspected of collaborating with outsiders, but with more direct clashes with Marine patrols.

Fighting is frequent again. Marines, Afghans and an interpreter have been killed in separate firefights in the past week.

Marine commanders had predicted the rise in violence, saying the Taliban and drug lords, for whom the region is financially and symbolically important, would try to undo initial American gains and inflict casualties that insurgents hoped might erode Afghan and American resolve. The same officers have also urged patience, and they have pointed to signs of engagement with civilians that they say are indicators of progress.

For at least the short term, the experience on Tuesday of First Platoon of the battalion's K Company, which ventured through vegetation on foot more than two miles from a main road, demonstrated the difficulties of fighting in southern Afghanistan during the hot months.

It also suggested that whatever the anticipated pace of an expected American-led push into Kandahar Province, even the most determined effort to defeat the Taliban and drug traffickers where they are deeply rooted would require substantial resources and time.

Months after the carefully planned offensive here, large areas of terrain are not fully cleared. In these areas, fighting continues. And while clearly punishing for the Taliban, the clashes also test American troops and exact a civilian toll.

Outside the Outpost

The patrol began at 5:30 a.m. with a mission to meet with elders in an area where Marine patrols have rarely gone. As the Marines left their outpost, the enlisted men knew what to expect. "You ready to get some?" asked one, as they loaded weapons.

"Let's go get shot," a second Marine answered.

A few dozen Marines were on the patrol. As they moved south they fanned out in small groups. Their formations obscured their numbers and gave them flexibility, making it possible for the platoon to move quickly from multiple angles against any gunmen who attacked any of the fire teams.

Staff Sgt. Matthew P. Dalrymple, 30, the platoon's senior enlisted Marine, walked with Third Squad. He predicted the course of the day. The walk south through the farmland would be quiet, he said, because the Taliban usually did not fight early in the morning. Fighting would begin as the sun climbed. "Like clockwork," he said. "Between 8:30 and 9:30."

Two hours later, after the Marines walked through fields and talked with farmers harvesting wheat or tending new plantings of cucumbers and melons, the first bursts of small-arms fire cracked by. The Marines looked through optical sights, seeking targets.

A fire team and snipers walking along the road had been ambushed from the east. The sounds of exploding grenades and M-4s and M-16s returning fire mixed with the incoming Kalashnikov fire. Staff Sergeant Dalrymple looked at his watch: 7:33 a.m. "They're an hour early," he said.

He wanted information. Had anyone been hit?

The opening skirmish was like many small-unit engagements in Helmand Province. Watching from hiding, the Taliban waited until several Marines were exposed between canals that restricted their movements. Then they fired.

The Marines dropped onto their stomachs or leapt into irrigation ditches flooded with dirty brown water, found their bearings and returned fire. The Taliban stopped shooting, either to pull back or take another position. Then fire came from the south.

The Marines maneuvered, pouring sweat and trying to flank. The second Taliban group ceased shooting, too. The Marines were now spread out and ready, but without targets to shoot. Had the Taliban pulled back? Or were they waiting for the Marines to expose themselves again?

A Wounded Farmer

As the Marines maneuvered, they came upon Mohammed, the wounded farmer, beside where the fire team had been ambushed. He had been shot from behind, struck in the left buttock. The bullet had exited his lower-right front side.

Corporal Boone, 22, radioed for help. The staff sergeant, accompanied by Hospitalman Edward S. Harger, 22, a corpsman, jogged to the wounded man. He snapped on rubber gloves.

Lying on his back, bleeding slowly, Mohammed, 50, said he had been working in the field when the Taliban opened fire. The Taliban had shot him, he said.

He moaned and twisted. Hospitalman Harger examined the entrance and exit wounds, dressed them and checked Mohammed's pulse. "It's weak, but he's going to be fine," he said.

"As long as we can keep him awake and talking," he added.

Mohammed wanted to sleep. His eyelids drooped. Helicopters had been called but were at least a half-hour away. "Hey!" the corpsman said. "Hey!"

Mohammed barely replied. The corpsman called for an interpreter. “Get his brother out here, or someone from his family!” he shouted. “We need someone to talk to him and keep him awake!”

Gunfire crackled again, this time from the west. The platoon’s Second Squad was under fire. The Taliban had fired now from three sides.

Mohammed’s brother took a place beside him, consoling him and keeping him awake.

At 8:45 a.m., two Black Hawk helicopters roared by. Staff Sergeant Dalrymple tossed a yellow-smoke grenade. One of the helicopters swung back and touched down nearby, blasting the group with hot dust and clumps of dried grass. Medics dashed from the aircraft. Soon Mohammed was gone.

Fierce Exchanges

The patrol continued. As the Marines crossed the fields, their backs to where Mohammed had been shot, the Taliban opened fire again.

“Behind us!” shouted Lance Cpl. Samuel D. Lecce, 20, as he jumped into a watery ditch. The lance corporal was not far from a wall. He stood, lunged out of the water, dashed to the wall and took a firing position at its corner, to cover the Marines farther out in the field.

“C’mon!” he shouted. “C’mon! C’mon!”

They ran toward him in twos and threes. Incoming bullets snapped by. Within a few minutes, Third Squad reassembled in a mud-walled compound. Its leader, Cpl. Raymond F. Charfauros, checked each team. No one had been hit.

The Marines passed around water and cigarettes. A few men swore. “There is no Taliban in Afghanistan, dude,” said Cpl. Ian E. Bradley, 24, crouched against an entryway.

He had been at the back of the squad. Assault-rifle and machine-gun rounds had whipped past him all around, but somehow missed. “Just give us a couple of weeks and we’ll win their hearts and minds,” he said, and shook his head.

Sweat rolled down his face and neck. It was not yet 10 a.m. The temperature climbed toward 100 degrees.

Two more helicopters — this time they were gunships — flew in circles overhead. The Taliban still fired.

The fight settled into back-and-forth exchanges, with the Taliban firing more than the Marines,

who waited for clear targets. During a lull, the platoon commander, First Lt. Jarrod D. Neff, 30, crossed the field with Second Squad and issued an order. The platoon would push back, leaving the safety of the walls to sweep separate compounds and tree lines from where it had been fired on.

After Third Squad moved back into the open, it came under fire again. This time, the men rushed into it. Lance Cpl. Niall J. Swider, 20, saw an Afghan with a PK machine gun at a compound doorway fire a burst at the patrol. His team bounded forward, chasing the man inside, and followed him, throwing hand grenades.

There was a brief, fierce exchange of fire within the tight confines. But the compound was open on the back side. Third Squad flowed in. The Taliban flowed out.

Corporal Charfauros ordered the house searched, and an Afghan soldier called inside to the occupants. An adult Afghan man stepped into the courtyard. He stood almost still, emotionless, overwhelmed.

His mother circled him, lifting her veil. She wailed and pleaded with the Marines. “Do not arrest him,” she begged.

The corporals had little time to decide. The man was clean and not sweating — not the condition of a man after several hours of fighting in the heat. Several small children watched from the door. Corporal Charfauros gestured.

Yasin, an Afghan soldier, told the man to return to his home.

Another bullet snapped overhead. The fighters who had run out the back were firing on their pursuers, covering their withdrawal across the open. Then more shooting could be heard, including the distinct sound of American M-16s and M-4s.

By rushing the compound quickly, Third Squad had flushed fighters into the sights of the rest of the platoon. This group of Taliban was scattering under fire.

Eyes in the Sky

Back at the command post, the officers of K Company watched a video feed from a [drone aircraft](#) that showed a man set aside a weapon and begin crawling away in a ditch. He was several hundred yards off, moving slowly, apparently wounded. They radioed his location to First Platoon.

Lieutenant Neff ordered Second Squad to search the field and find the man and his weapon.

Early in the afternoon, Cpl. Adrian D. Watson's voice came over the radio. "I've got the gun," he said.

The man had escaped. But his PK machine gun was in Second Squad's hands. After nearly five hours, the fighting, for these Marines, had stopped. That evening, at their outpost, they heard that a patrol from another company was now fighting, too.